



05. 夢をまよへる蛹

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05. 夢さまよう蛹

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大助を中憑きにしたのは、あたしなんだよ。

だからお願いしてんの。
あたしの心を殺してんだから、って——

がつがつぐんと、約束したんです。
お互いの夢を、決しておきならぬって……

Shiika



0.00 The Others

Rain fiercely assaulted Daisuke's face as he lie face-up collapsed.

The air, mixed with the smell of the rain, was unchanged from how it was five years ago.

This was the smell of his birthplace.

Daisuke was born and spent his days up until the later grades of elementary school here.

However, in the night sky reflected in his pupils, a scene far removed from reality spread out.

Through the cracks between the dark clouds, one could catch a glimpse of a far too large purple-colored swallowtail butterfly. On the surface of its four wings, large enough to cover the entire town, was a pattern like human eyes. Purple scales emitting phosphorous light poured down from the butterfly in the sky.

"Thinking you can win against me—have you come this far telling yourself that?"

While he was being hit by the rain on the cold floor, *Oogui's* voice entered Daisuke's ears.

"You should have known though... Only you, who knows of my ability, should be aware that you can't win against me as I am now, right?"

Oogui's sweet whisper didn't change in the slightest ever since he came here. That bewitching voice that took away the reason of all its listeners made fun of him staking his life to fight her, sounding as though she was playing with him as if he was a toy.

"Despite knowing that you can't win, you still had no choice but to come

here..."

The air mixed with the rain's smell was unchanged from how it was five years ago.

It was the same smell of creeping despair from that time.

"You've shouldered everything and fought continually by yourself. Nothing's changed in these five years."

Mustering all of his remaining power, Daisuke roused his body.

While he was trying to stand up, the rain wetting his entire body mixed with his endlessly flowing fresh blood. The red stream was being absorbed into the drainage of the already closed elementary school's roof. The long coat that he wore soaked up the rain and blood, changing in color.

"I'm different... from how I was five years ago..."

Standing up, Daisuke's face was dirtied by rain, blood and mud.

He raised his face and stared directly at *Oogui*.

"No, nothing's changed."

Gazing at the wounded Daisuke, she sneered at him.

"You're simply about to repeat what happened that day... from the time you turned into a Mushitsuki."

Purple scales were raining around the woman wrapped in a crimson-colored long coat.

The scales created countless masses in the air, transforming into atypically-shaped insects. The Mushi, crowding so densely as if to completely cover his field of vision, raised yells that seemed like it would tear apart the rainclouds.

"I had defeated *Shinpu* when I rescued Senri. —So I'll definitely beat you as well...!"

Daisuke raised his gun, pointing the muzzle fused with the jaw of the Cleridae toward *Oogui*.

He squeezed the trigger.

—*Clink*, a vain metallic sound echoed.

Facing Daisuke who had defeated *Shinpu*, *Oogui* gradually deepened her smile. She snickered suggestively while overlooking the townscape visible from the rooftop.

"It seems that the main dish has finally arrived."

"...!"

Daisuke widened his eyes.

He couldn't see anything in front of *Oogui's* line of sight. But, she was probably the only one could sense a certain person approaching here.

I didn't make it in time—

He swept aside the sense of despair welling up in his heart.

No... I can still—

Throwing away his gun, Daisuke gathered up his remaining power. The green pattern covering his cheeks and fists emitted a bright light. The Cleridae assimilated with Daisuke handed out its power to him.

"I won't let you—"

He gazed at *Oogui* with his blood-dyed face, powerfully kicking the ground.

The green light tearing through the darkness of the night charged towards her.

"*Oogui!!!*"

The Mushi created around *Oogui* assaulted Daisuke. Some widened their mouthparts made of purple scales; others spread their wings and shot masses of flames and ice, lightning strikes or shockwaves.

Daisuke held his right fist aloft. The pattern etched to the fist exerting his full might shone in green.

His full-powered blow pounded the pursuing Mushi.

Annihilating the Mushi that were hit by it, the wave of the impact was yet to cease and so smashed the surrounding Mushi to smithereens. The school

rooftop's floor caved in, wild cracks running through it. The energy created by the aftershock blew the metal fences away.

Daisuke raised his running speed, aiming directly for *Oogui*. The remaining Mushi all shot their attacks one after another, but he didn't stop. Several Mushi bit into him, but he pulled them along with him while shortening his distance to *Oogui*.

"Compared to back then—I became stronger."

Oogui was calmly sneering at Daisuke during his struggle through the curtain of Mushi.

He brandished his shining fist.

"—No matter how strong you've become, you can't defeat me... you should be aware of that, right?"

While *Oogui* smiled with enjoyment, a lone Mushi appeared in front of her.

Daisuke recognized the fake Mushi created by the purple scales—the Mushi had a rear split into two.

This is Akatsuki's—

As he widened his eyes, Daisuke's vision was filled with countless laser beams.

The torrent of light shot toward the sky pierced him.

"...!"

Several beams shot at his stomach, shoulders and legs, penetrating the long coat provided by the SEPB.

Further laser beams were fired, vaporizing the violent rain.

Thrown into the sky, Daisuke was pierced by the heat rays again and again. Having already received irreversible injuries, he couldn't even evade.

From the impact that came as a thud and the cold sensation touching his body, he realized that he had fallen on the ground.

He could feel his life sapping along with his spilling blood.

His rapidly weakening heartbeats sounded close to his ears.

"Forget all about fighting and protecting... and just go to sleep peacefully."

Oogui's voice sounded horribly distant.

She was facing him as he approached death—

But even so, Daisuke tried to stand up.

1.00 Chiharu Part 1

-

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Every day was peaceful and warm.

Since she was full of curiosity ever since she was young, she lacked the things known as a sense of danger and protective instincts. She believed that people around her thought of her as quite a risky child.

Therefore, when she found that *blue cocoon* she wasn't afraid at all.

Just like when she chased fish swimming in a creek.

Just like when she chased the butterflies she caught sight of on a paddy field.

In the empty, vacant lot, she touched it.

The fingertip that touched it became numb, and *something* from the cocoon slipped into her body.

Ba bump.

She heard a throb. It wasn't her heart but the sign of another life.

—Her body was split into two by an unseen power.

That was how she felt. It was the feeling as if she was thoroughly split into two starting from the top of her head and down to her toes.

The next instant, *she* who split from her stood in front of her eyes.

It was a mere illusion with no substance.

Precisely because it was ripped out of her it looked exactly like her. It only had

an ever so slightly meaner-looking face than her.

When *she* looked at her past self – meaning at her own face, she made an indescribable expression.

"Whoops, seems like my host this time is quite the stupid-looking brat. A complete failure."

The drooping eye corners which she had from birth now despairingly slanted even more. She added the reaction of putting a hand on her forehead and looking up at the sky.

Having someone with her face and voice make fun of her made her angry.

Sorry for looking stupid, really—

She remembered to puff her cheeks just like the fearless child she was.

Her other self headed for her in a resigned manner, holding out both hands.

For some reason she held out her hands too.

Their slender fingers intertwined.

She couldn't feel anything.

Yet a very faint warmth was conveyed through it. A relieving, pleasant warmth.

With that she realized.

Although her other self had a bad mouth and a bad attitude – and adding to that, although she knew the one in front of her was nothing more than an illusion, she had a clear premonition.

It wasn't a bad person.

"Oh well, nothing I can do about it. Nice to meet you, host-san. My name is—"

"Chiharu."

Hearing a voice from behind, she turned around.

A small silhouette with the setting sun at its back appeared.

She couldn't see his face as it was turned back but she realized who it was from the outline of his shadow. From his voice. From his presence.

"Daisuke."

6th year elementary school student Kusuriya Chiharu broke into a broad smile.

"Did you come to get me?"

"Mom got worried so she told me to look for you. Let's go back already."

"Coming!"

"My name is Aria Varej – wait a minute! Are you even listening?"

By the time Daisuke had called out to her the illusion of her other self disappeared. However, she could still hear her own voice in her ears.

"Since I have such a cute brother I'm the happiest person in the world!"

"Wha... S-stop! Don't hold my hand!"

"H-huh? No way? Did you not hear me? Can you possibly not hear me? I tried showing off because this is our first time meeting but was it all for naught? Aria's super shocked!"

Waving her little brother's hands, Chiharu chuckled while walking through the residential area bathed in twilight.

I can hear you–

She mentally stuck out her tongue.

This was her payback for being called a complete failure just now.

She didn't know if the voice she could hear was an illusion, a daydream or perhaps something else. Yet she didn't want anyone to disturb her during this time.

"I told you to let go of me! It's embarrassing for siblings to do this! Chiharu!"

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

They swayed to and fro in their peaceful daily life.

The thing that secured the happy days of the risky child Chiharu was the warmth of her brother's hand.

Only for this moment when his existence could be made her own she didn't want to let go of his hand.

"W-what, so you *can* hear me! Your acting almost made me cry! Teasing my host should be my duty, don't take people's jobs!"

Although her other self was reproaching her, that voice also seemed somewhat relieved.

"I won't let go. You're too weak, Daisuke!"

Her brother desperately tried shaking her hand off, yet Chiharu kept holding it tightly. She was still stronger than her brother who was one year her junior.

Below the orange sky, she walked alongside her brother.

That was the day Chiharu had first met with that abnormal being.

With the main culprit behind the birth of the disaster-bringing Mushi.

The vagrant blue cocoon that continually wandered in search for a safe haven.

And its name was – Aria Vareï.

•

Dispensing with the preliminaries, how are you?

I, Ayukawa Chiharu, am in the height of my youth.

Starting next month I'll be a third year high school student. I have lots of friends, and I promised to work along with everyone in the student council. I've also been confessed to by a classmate. Ah, but I turned him down. It's not like I hate him, but I feel like dating someone with half-hearted feelings is rude to them. It's just that, really.

—But you know, I already gave up all of that. I already gave up forgetting everything and living happily. My enjoyable days of paradise ended yesterday.

Because I remembered.

I recalled the time when I wasn't Ayukawa Chiharu but Kusuriya Chiharu.

And your name as well.

...Right, Daisuke?

"Nnn..."

A hotel bedroom in the suburbs of Nishito City.

In front of a large mirror, Ayukawa Chiharu rose to her full height.

In the mirror was her 17 year-old grown form. Having retrieved her lost memories from until five years ago, she also recalled that her drooping eyes were something she was born with. Her hair was long but her bangs were cut short evenly. She was taller than the average height of her classmates, thin and slender.

And you're already sixteen, huh—

While looking at the mirror, her "narrating" habit that continued for who knows how many years naturally showed itself.

Until now it was a delusion without any addressee.

But now it was different.

She clearly recalled who she was addressing.

I wonder what sort of face you're making right now, Daisuke— "You awake already? If you are then come over here."

She heard someone knocking on the bedroom door. A blunt voice without a shred of fondness called to her.

Chiharu energetically opened the door and went to the living room.

"G'morning! What a great morning!"

"Hah? Nothing's great about it. I'm injured so I can't really move well."

The petite girl sitting on the sofa looked in her direction. At that moment her expression turned cold.

The school uniform-wearing girl seated on the floor also glanced at Chiharu. However, apparently losing her interest immediately, she returned to finely ripping a tissue in her hands – Chiharu had no idea why she was even doing

that, but anyway she returned to her previous activity.

"You..."

The petite girl – Konomura Chami – raised her fingers to her brows and frowned. She was shorter than Chiharu by about half a head and the ends of her short hair were pointed up. On her face that wore glasses with thin lenses there were also band-aids. Bandages wrapped around her stomach could also be seen from the hem of her long-sleeved T-shirt.

"Haah... oh well. C'mon, get over here already."

"Eh? Is that your only reaction? How cold, how lonely, Chami-chan!"

Chiharu, who was boldly exposing her bare skin – as she was wearing a bikini swimsuit, held her head. That swimsuit was found inside the closet, meant to be used for the indoor pool.

—Yesterday was a day that could be said to be the turning point of Ayukawa Chiharu's life.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it was the day she had finally recovered her true self.

For five years she spent her days peacefully in middle school and high school. Her mother remarried someone who was her past classmate, so she ended up changing her family name to Ayukawa, and she spent her days happily as the vice president of the student council.

However, Chiharu always had doubts about her happy life inside of her. She felt guilty about getting the "main role" on the stage known as youth.

And Chiharu finally recalled the reason for that.

It happened because of the fight inside the giant tower built as part of the Nishito Mega City Project, 'URBAN'. It was the decisive fight planned by the girl in front of her, Konomura Chami, who faced against her fate of having nothing more than a supporting role. Being involved in that battle against the government agency known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, Chiharu was able to recall her past using the shock from that.

Why was she able to spend such peaceful days?

Why has she always felt such anxiety and uneasiness amidst that happiness?

Chiharu now knew the reasons for that.

"I wanted to comfort you thinking that you'd both be tired after! Well? Look at this nice body that would make any guy swoon! Look, here's a sexy pose!"

She leaned forward, heading towards Chami who was furrowing her brows in the living room. She even added a blowing kiss.

"S-stop being an idiot."

It was surprisingly effective. Chami's cheeks became lightly flushed.

"Since we're both girls it wouldn't make me happy at all! More importantly, come over here already and explain some stuff! Even though I've done my best to run away with you from 'URBAN' yesterday I didn't get any explanation!"

"Hey Aya-chan, did it comfort you?"

Ignoring the angry Chami, she called toward the school uniform-wearing girl sitting on the carpet.

That girl, known as Sugitsu Aya, was the one who took care of Chiharu and the wounded Chami last night. She seemed to be one of Chami's comrades. With her black, long hair and a white face she was a Japanese-style beauty that invoked the image of a Japanese traditional doll. Her fingers that kept shredding the tissue paper were long and slender.

Raising her almond eyes to look up the swimsuit-wearing Chiharu, Aya soon lowered her gaze again.

"If I break down something slowly like this it makes me very relaxed."

"Huh, is that so? That's not what I asked though..."

Trying to go to the other side of the table, Chiharu flinched.

An eerie creature was hiding behind the sofa. Its azure body resembling a metallic armor was split into three parts, with its head and torso relatively small compared to its rear. Below its elytra emitting a metallic luster a soft-seeming belly was continually rumbling. Its orange-colored sharp feelers and legs emitted a creaking sound while moving.

Judging just by its shape it looked like a ground beetle, but it was greatly abnormal. She never wanted to even try that, but if Chiharu were to wrap her hands around it she wasn't sure if her fingertips would touch. The creature gulped down cluttered cans of juice rolling on the floor with its elastic mouthpart.

As if reminded by Chiharu's response, Chami spoke to the girl at her feet.

"Don't let your Mushi out for such a long time, Aya. You'll waste your energy."

"Aluminum is its favorite dish."

"...You don't listen to what people are saying at all are you. Or rather, did your personality change?"

Mushi—

About ten years passed since these mysterious life-forms were discovered in Japan.

Since they visually shared many similarities with real life insects they were named "Mushi". However, the existence of Mushi couldn't be explained by physics, and regardless of the fact that many people witnessed them the government officially denied their existence.

The Mushi possessed boys and girls, growing by eating their dreams. Those possessed by Mushi were named Mushitsuki, and although they were treated as nonexistent, they were also the targets of fear and discrimination. Those who became Mushitsuki could use their Mushi's supernatural powers, but at the same time their vitality, mental energy and wishes of "I want to be like that" — were being devoured.

Having one's dream consumed meant the drying up of their physical and mental energy, leading the host along with their Mushi to weaken and die. Even if that didn't happen, once their Mushi was killed, the backlash of losing that which became a part of them would turn them into a walking corpse, a Fallen.

"Gas can be replenished from the air, but it can't be done like that with metal..."

The muttering Aya was a Mushitsuki, and the thing behind the sofa was her

Mushi.

It wasn't just Aya; even Chami sitting on the sofa was a Mushitsuki. The latter even belonged to the governmental organization that secretly worked to search for and apprehend Mushitsuki, the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Until yesterday at least.

In contrast to Aya and Chami, Chiharu wasn't a Mushitsuki. She was a completely normal civilian with no special power.

"I'll ask again to be sure, but there's no mistake about you being the older sister of Kusuriya Daisuke, right?"

Staying seated on the sofa, Chami didn't even turn around. Accordingly Chiharu couldn't see her expression.

Not understanding the meaning of her question, Chiharu tilted her head. But she soon understood and nodded.

"I see. You said you know about Daisuke, but you didn't know about me being his sister. Hmm, don't I have anything? Some sort of proof..."

"I don't need any proof!"

Chami suddenly raised a loud voice.

"I now finally realized! I realized why I've been ordered to monitor you for five whole years!"

Intimidated by the ground beetle, Chiharu circled around the sofa.

"'Since she's someone related to the Rank 1 Mushitsuki we should keep an eye on her just in case' – so that's what it was? Haa, such a shitty job is a perfect fit for a Rank 10 small fry like me!"

Exposing her anger, Chami also pounded on the table. She then grimaced, perhaps her wounds hurting.

"The SEPB is especially scared of the appearance of a Rank 1 Mushitsuki... that's why they became paranoid and monitored you 'just in case', fearing that since you have a deep connection to *Kakkou* you might become another powerful Mushitsuki! And those with the possibility of turning into a Mushitsuki are boys and girl during puberty... so your mother not being under monitoring

serves as proof!"

"Me, turn into a Mushitsuki...?"

"Shit, they made me do this bullshit for five years... Those SEPB shitheads are underestimating me!"

Chiharu unhesitatingly inquired Chami who was full of resentment.

"Say, Chami-chan. There's also something I didn't properly ask you about yet."

"Huh? About what?"

"About Daisuke! Chami-chan, you know my brother right? Tell me stuff like where he is now and what he's doing."

"Yeah, I know that demon."

Chami spat out. As if saying she felt bad even letting it out of her mouth.

"Demon? No, I'm talking about Daisuke! Ku-su-ri-ya Dai-su-ke! Even if it's you, Chami-chan, there should be a limit to how much you can mishear! That was so rude!"

Chiharu lectured her while still wearing a swimsuit and clenching both fists. Chami frowned.

"No, as I'm saying, that demon..."

"Daisuke's no demon! He's a bit dishonest sometimes, but he's a good kid who's kinder than anyone!"

She puffed her cheeks and glared at Chami.

"..."

—Before they noticed a heavy silence befell the living room.

Since no one said anything, she reluctantly repeated it again.

"Daisuke's a good kid who's kinder than anyone!"

Chami stared at Chiharu with eyes as if she had seen a ghost. She diverted her gaze to Aya at her feet as if seeking her help. Aya expressionlessly shook her head to the side. She seemed resigned.

"Umm... well, let's put aside your brother complex, or rather your little

brother obsession for now. There's a chance that both of us are thinking of the wrong person. It has to be the wrong person."

"I'm not thinking of the wrong person! Daisuke's a good kid! A good kid's Daisuke!"

"I don't get what you're even saying. Just calm down. ...If you ask me then I'll tell you as much as you'd like about the Kusuriya Daisuke I know. But what will you after hearing that? If you just want to meet him after all this time then you're better off not asking."

Chami said in a cold tone, looking at her keenly.

"I only saved you because that's how things went, so I don't care what you want to do and where. I can only hope that there's some amazing find in your retrieved memories that benefits me. But if you end up acting on your own it could be a problem."



Chami said in a bluntly refusing tone. In reality it was just like that.

Yes, Chiharu had retrieved her memories.

Five years ago...

What did Chiharu, the older sister, had done to her one and only brother Daisuke that time?

She wasn't able to clearly remember it yet, but she was only able to understand the sin she had committed.

"It's just like you said, Chami-chan. I want to meet Daisuke... no, I have to."

In the past she had done something terrible to Daisuke.

—Even though you could've lived happily if you didn't recall it...

She heard a nostalgic voice from somewhere.

The unredeemable sin she had committed on her brother. That was— "...I'm the one who turned Daisuke into a Mushitsuki."

Chami and Aya widened their eyes.

"I believe that Daisuke definitely hates me. And so I'm going to ask him..."

Chiharu wore a cheerful smile.

"Please kill me'—"

That was the emotion she had harbored five years ago.

The wish that the current Chiharu has retrieved.

1.01 Daisuke Part 1

In the center of Nishito City, the main road connected to the station was crowded with a great number of pedestrians.

As this time in morning could be called rush hour, there were many office workers wearing suits and students wearing school uniforms.

Kusuriya Daisuke mixed among these people, advancing directly ahead on the sidewalk.

Even among 16 year-old high school students he had no outstanding features and had an average build. His hairstyle was also plain, as was the ordinary sports bag slung on his shoulder. However, there weren't any students to wear the same blazer he had. Because it was the uniform of a school in another city known as Ouka City.

None turned back to look at Daisuke as his appearance could be called nothing else than completely ordinary. And it was because he purposely had this appearance with no special features so that no one would notice him.

Even so, Daisuke realized a certain fact.

I'm being followed—

And not by one or two people. He searched for the presence at his back without standing out.

"Four, no, five people..."

He muttered inside his mouth. His mutter was erased by the car honking in the road, so even the woman who passed close by enough to touch his shoulder didn't notice it.

Daisuke began thinking.

...I've been followed ever since I came out to the main road. Are they tailing

me knowing I'm Kakkou? Even if I carelessly call my comrades it could be troublesome. Maybe I should lure them to a deserted spot myself and then catch them— For Daisuke the title of a high school student was only meant to hide his real nature.

Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's East Central Branch monitor squad Blaze Class Rank 1 member, *Kakkou*. That was Kusuriya Daisuke's real position.

Since he hunted Mushitsuki despite being a Mushitsuki himself, there were countless people who hated him.

But that was only if they knew he was *Kakkou*. Normally he played the part of a normal high school student. There should have been only few people who knew his real identity.

"...?"

While Daisuke thought of how to deal with the problem, the presence tailing him suddenly vanished.

Not understanding the goal of his opponents, he tilted his head.

"Well, if they're gone I can leave it alone."

Only the area with Ouka City in its center was under the jurisdiction of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's East Central Branch that Daisuke belonged to.

Nishito City was outside of his jurisdiction, and because of that he couldn't take any offensive actions beyond the absolute necessary. There was one time when the fact he had taken part in a large-scale battle outside his jurisdiction became a problem.

It was best for him to end up not having to fight unnecessarily.

"Fuah..."

As the tension was absolved he let out a yawn. He had barely gotten any sleep ever since arriving at Nishito City the previous day.

"I first have to make sure if there's anything in this city."

The front of the main road was a traffic circle.

It was Nishito Station. Looking to the side, police tapes surrounded the luxury hotel nearby. Looking up, he could see that the windows of the top floors were destroyed. Because the local police and people related to the construction work came in and out of the hotel's entrance, it appeared one couldn't enter the building.

He was curious, but decided to postpone the hotel. There was a place he had much more interest in.

Nishito Mega City Project, 'URBAN'.

The tower seen at the other side of the station appeared to be called Urban Tower.

Undoubtedly it once exhibited a beautiful appearance, but it was now a shadow of its former self.

—When Daisuke had arrived in Nishito City yesterday the great tower was enveloped by crimson flames. He even saw the large fire-trucks surrounding the tower hosing it down, but the force of the fire was dreadful. The fact there were a lot less ambulances than fire-trucks was due to there not being any people inside, probably because of the suspended construction work.

The fire was extinguished after lasting the entire night. People who entered the station raised their faces to look at Urban Tower that burnt down to ashes with mixed feelings.

"First comes 'URBAN'... The timing is far too good with me coming here."

Crossing the station's roundabout, he headed for 'URBAN'.

"It might have something to do with *Fuyuhotaru*... with Shiika."

He naturally hastened his walking pace.

Daisuke had come to this city due to receiving the information that "*Fuyuhotaru* is in Nishito City" from a certain person.

Secret Class Rank 1 Mushitsuki, *Fuyuhotaru*.

Anmoto Shiika.

"Shiika—"

He unconsciously looked down at his own palm. Although he held Shiika's hand only once, he could clearly remember its warmth even now. He recalled the smile of that mild-mannered girl.

Forgetting that he was a Mushitsuki, even forgetting he had been followed, Daisuke's expression softened. It returned to become not the expression of *Kakkou* whom everyone feared as a demon, but the true face of Kusuriya Daisuke.

"..."

I want to see you – he was about to blurt this out and so closed his opening mouth.

Coming to Nishito City was fine, but what would he do if he actually met Shiika? He fully knew what would happen then.

They would probably end up fighting again.

Being the only Mushitsuki who ever managed to revive from the Fallen condition, Shiika was a key figure. Since Daisuke belonged to the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau he was in a position to pursue her, and Shiika was currently on the run. To say nothing of the fact they were both Mushitsuki who possessed the most dangerous powers. If they ended up fighting they wouldn't be able to get out of it unscathed.

Biting his lips, Daisuke's expression returned to that of *Kakkou*.

"Even if there is some connection... she's probably not here anymore."

The entrance of 'URBAN' facing the highway was blocked by a police barricade, with only the officials coming in and out of the premises. He could also see people who seemed to be the media.

According to a newspaper he had seen in a convenience store on the way there, the fire that assaulted 'URBAN' was concluded to be man-made, meaning it was arson.

However, the scale was too big for it to be mere arson. Daisuke thought that someone probably used the tower to accomplish some goal. They probably

tried carrying out something different from the original reason for its construction.

In front of Daisuke's eyes was nothing more than ruins. It was merely the stage left after the actors had left.

Nevertheless, there should be some traces left. Unless he investigated that it was meaningless for him to have come there.

"*Minmin* also came from the direction of 'URBAN'. Seems like there's no mistake there was a battle there."

Daisuke went around the site, looking for a spot that had no barricade or people.

He had come to Nishito City to find the tracks of Shiika, yet met a different person there.

Former member of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's East Central Branch, Blaze Class Rank 6 *Minmin*.

She was the girl supposedly turned into a Fallen during the mission to capture *Fuyuhotaru* the last Christmas.

—*Be careful, Kakkou-kun... Central Headquarters is hiding one of the Original Three...*

This girl, real name Horisaki Azusa, left these words to Daisuke and turned into a Fallen again.

—*Aah... I want to meet you once more... Keigo-san...*

The girl who adored Haji Keigo, the Branch Director of the East Central Branch, muttered this at the end.

Daisuke had already thrown away the emotions known as compassion and pity long ago. And yet he still prioritized *Minmin*'s safety – probably because he sympathized with her feelings.

At the end, Daisuke devoted himself to protect *Minmin* in the hideout that had been prepared for his use for the whole night without any sleep. Because of that he lost his chance of searching for Shiika.

"Central Headquarters is hiding one of the Original Three, huh? These guys have been hiding secrets since long ago... What on earth are they scheming—"

The distrust he felt for the Central Headquarters until now rose conclusively. He could no longer trust them.

"If I can find even a single clue here, I'll settle everything next time."

On the part facing away from the highway Daisuke found an inconspicuous entrance. He snuck into the premises of 'URBAN' and approached the tower that was now only fire ruins. Moving to the shadows of the heavy machinery left behind, he entered the interior through a large hole opened up in the side of the tower.

Inside the building were the policemen taking pictures of the location of the fire and a few journalists. They were using a certain stopped escalator in the center of the building, moving to inside the tower.

Daisuke walked behind the destroyed pillars, aiming for the emergency stairs at the back. The wall's coating was charred black and there seemed to be no human traffic there.

While heading to the upper floors he equipped the goggles he took out of his bag. They were large goggles that covered his face completely. That was standard equipment for members of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

"The marks on the first floor... they're traces of Mushi fighting. I'll keep going up."

Daisuke climbed up the stairs while stifling his footsteps.

There was no mistake that the traces of destruction etched on the first-floor lobby were made by a large Mushi. He had no idea what conclusion the local police reached, but he would never mistake that.

I'm tired of seeing Mushitsuki battle traces—

As far as Daisuke, who had accumulated more battle experience than any other Mushitsuki, could see, there were no traces of Shiika's ability. If *Fuyuhotaru* had fought there, there would've probably been nothing left of the

tower.

"Was Shiika at an even higher floor...? No, she might not have been here in the first place..."

And even if she was, Shiika hadn't used her power. Meaning—

"Did someone protect Shiika? Or had something completely different gotten involved in the battle...?"

That was the limit of what he could conjecture based on the current state.

While aiming above he peeked into the lobby from time to time, checking the state of the ruined interior. There were places policemen were still inspecting but also empty floors.

"So there were two Mushitsuki fighting at the very least."

Putting the damage from the fire aside, the scars engraved in the building could be divided into two categories. There were traces that seemed to have been slashed by large claws and parts that seemed to have been gouged by impacts related to heat. Most likely the former came from a Minion Type Mushitsuki, but the latter was harder to pinpoint.

"But..."

If this was a battle revolving around Shiika, it was natural to think it was an assassin sent from Central Headquarters.

Another possibility was someone with a position protecting Shiika – such as Mushibane.

"Were there any other Mushitsuki as powerful as Rina still in Mushibane...? Never mind Akatsuki, there's a high chance they're hiding other troublesome ones."

The resistance group created by the Mushitsuki hidden in the general public to oppose the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau – Mushibane.

It was believed that when they'd lost Tachibana Rina – their leader who was known as Lady Bird, Mushibane would only keep weakening. But apparently there was a need to acknowledge them again.

"If Shiika had been caught by the SEPB then Touko-san would've immediately contacted me. Since it didn't happen, does that mean Shiika escaped safely... or does it mean that Central Headquarters is hiding her?"

Daisuke's field of vision suddenly opened up.

The emergency staircase ended and he reached a transparent space.

It was an observation deck. All sides were fitted with glass.

Except for Daisuke there was no one on the floor. In the space at the center was the continuation of the suspended escalator. It had probably been surrounded by a cube-shaped plastic, but heat melted it into a miserable appearance.

Climbing the escalator, he reached the roof.

It was perhaps in the midst of being disassembled as there were the remains of a crane there. A drum that looked as if it would contain fuel was crushed, losing its contents. He could see a destroyed water pump inside.

Nishito City's higher-altitude wind blew Daisuke's blazer.

"...Tch."

Even if it wasn't Shiika it was fine. He thought he would find some clues to the ones fighting there such as scraps of clothes, but there was nothing.

It was perhaps all burned down in the fire, or possibly the local branch of SEPB had already destroyed all evidence. The SEPB had already completed the system to deal with Mushitsuki-related incidents.

"So it was all for nothing. If I request cooperation from the local branch then my presence in this city would reveal all sorts of things... Will investigating through Touko-san be fine?"

Leaning on the fences stained by soot, he brought out a cellphone from his pocket.

Dialing the number that connected to the East Central Branch's intelligence division, he waited for a reply. The other party immediately appeared.

"Please confirm there is no third party in a radius of 10 meterztha! —I, I did

not stutter! I really did not! Don't mind it, *Maimai*-chan! If I correct myself and say nothing has happened I will not be found out!"

"If you don't cut that out you'll really get fired..."

The East Central Branch Daisuke belonged to had several people in the intelligence division, but he apparently drew the short end of the stick. The voice of the girl who couldn't manage to calm down tried to restate the situation.

"U-umm, please confirm there is no third party in a radius of 10 meters and state your member code—"

Cutting off the girl's voice, Daisuke recited his member code.

The communication circuits connecting the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau were all checked in real time by cutting-edge information appliances. This was done to prevent non-members from obtaining any information related to Mushitsuki.

"Member code confirmed. Comparing voice print. —Finished. Switching over to special communication channel. Um, this is the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's East Central Branch information management division. Starting now the conversation will be voice recorded under the personal records of East Central Branch monitor squad member, Blaze Class Rank 1 Kakkouwoaw. —D-don't mind it, your failure was not found out yet, you are just barely OK!"

"You'd better prepare yourself for when I come back... Leaving that aside, please connect me with Touko-san. This isn't as urgent a business for a direct line, so if you can't get hold of her I'll just leave a message."

"Okay, the Acting Branch Director then. I will confirm her current location, so please wait. How about I sing for you in the meanwhile? La lala la... kyan!"

"Ah, *Kakkou*-san? Is that you? Good, I have something I must talk with you about—"

"Touko-san? Why are you at the intelligence division..."

The girl he was talking to was probably thrust away by Goroumaru Touko. He

could hear some clamor like "D-don't mind it, *Maimai*-chan! I did not bump my head against the corner of the desk! I am not bleeding or anything! Even if my vision is dyed all red and I cannot see tomorrow, my shining future is—" and so forth in the background.

"I just contacted the branch in charge of Nishito City. I didn't know how to contact the branch heads in the case of trading highly-classified information, so I came here to do it directly..."

It was a miserable voice, fitting neither her 23 years of age nor her position as the higher-up in charge of a branch. Since it was her, she was probably tottering around without fixing her bed hair today as well.

"Trading important information? With the branch here?"

"Y-yes. Umm... oh right. Has anything changed with you, *Kakkou*-san? If possible I would like to hear about your situation first."

Touko's voice coming from the phone sounded unusually stiff. Since even among the staff of the East Central Branch she was one of the people who lacked tension the most just after the other girl he had just spoken to, it was unusual.

Daisuke raised an eyebrow but for the time being he talked about his situation first just like his boss Touko asked him to.

"I've secured *Minmin*."

"...!"

Declaring this without any preface, Daisuke could hear her gasp.

"She's already gone back to a Fallen, but she said something curious at the end. —You'd better not trust Central Headquarters anymore, Touko-san."

"Did *Minmin*-san really revive? Ah, but why did she go back to a Fallen... Why can't I trust Central Headquarters...?"

"I'm hiding her in my hideout now. Since only you and I are supposed to know its whereabouts, I'd like for you to arrange transport as soon as possible."

Ignoring Touko's panic, Daisuke continued.

"I wasn't able to ascertain if *Fuyuhotaru* really was there, but I found traces of a large battle on site. I wanted to try asking the local branch whether they know anything about it, but... I didn't think you'd have already contacted them. Sometimes you actually do your job, huh."

"H-how rude. Even I sometimes... no, I always do my job but... umm, since there was something worrying this time—"

"Something worrying?"

"Y-yes. Umm, how do I put it..."

Touko hesitated. Daisuke became increasingly puzzled.

"Please listen calmly, *Kakkou*-san. Okay?"

"What's going on, Touko-san. You're giving me a bad feeling."

"Since I confirmed this with the local branch there's no mistake but... Oh, but I wasn't able to ascertain whether or not it has to do with the battle you told me about, *Kakkou*-san. So it doesn't necessarily mean she was exposed to danger. She might have simply run away from home."

"...Run away from home?"

He repeated her words. He had no idea what Touko was trying to tell him.

"Starting yesterday, a certain girl going to Nishito Sousei High School disappeared. Contact with the low-ranking member of the local branch that monitored her was also lost."

Even Touko-san who would usually complain one way or another seemed more dismayed than her usual today.

"I had a bad premonition. Ever since I heard the name Nishito City from Ume-san... but I thought it was just a coincidence. Because only Keigo-senpai and I were supposed to know about it, and he concealed her identity even from the local branch here...!"

"Calm down, Touko-san. Who is she—"

"She had left a will-like message in her house. 'I remembered. I'm going to look for my brother' was apparently written."

Taking a deep breath as if finally resolving herself, Touko spoke.

"Her name is... Ayukawa Chiharu."

The wind stopped.

The scenery in front of Daisuke's eyes froze over.

"The name she had before her mother remarried was Kusuriya Chiharu.
—*Kakkou*-san."

He could hear Touko's sad voice from far away.

"She's your sister."

Daisuke's sister Chiharu.

Ever since they ended up being separated five years ago, never mind seeing her, he didn't even know what kind of life she had been leading.

She had lived in this city, and even went missing since yesterday—

"I have ascertained that your mother is safe. But as for Chiharu-san, we couldn't grasp her traces from her friends' testimonies. Even if we try to understand the cause for this, the one in charge of her monitoring – as you know, they'd obviously had assigned someone to monitor the close family of a high-ranking Fusion Type, but anyway that person's whereabouts are also..."

Daisuke was standing stock still, thinking about his sister's whereabouts becoming unknown as well as the contents of the note she had left behind.

—"I remembered".

What had his sister, from whom he was separated for so long, recalled?

He didn't know.

Yet she, none other than his older sister left the words "I remembered" behind and vanished.

That fact woke up the memories buried inside Daisuke.

"...*Kakkou*-san? Are you listening?"

He recalled the bewitching voice burned into his ears from the time he was in elementary school.

—Fufu, *if one day your sister...*

He recalled the unavoidable sense of defeat along with the rainbow-colored pupils.

"'If one day'—"

Daisuke's mouth moved on its own.

—*Ends up recalling everything that's happened this day...*

"'Ends up recalling everything that's happened this day'—"

"*Kakkou-san?* What's wrong? What are you saying..."

The sound of his molars creaking due to him strongly clenching them echoed in his ears.

His search for Anmoto Shiika or the investigation of the battle that happened at 'URBAN' were completely gone from his mind.

Could what I heard about five years ago be happening "now"...?

His heartbeats growing in intensity, he desperately held on to his composure.

"*Kakkou-san?* Can you hear me?"

"Y-yeah..."

Even saying just that took all of his efforts.

"G-good. Umm, so, I have to acknowledge she is in an extremely dangerous situation. Having the person who monitored her also disappear makes the SEPB anxious – because it could mean that their assumption Chiharu-san would be the same kind of Mushitsuki as you held true. Not to mention that when Central Headquarters come to know of it it's possible they would acknowledge her as a dangerous character..."

"Chiharu would—"

He started saying in surprise.

If what Daisuke feared would come to pass—

He had no time.

In addition, when trying to stop it he couldn't rely on the Special

Environmental Preservation Bureau.

He could no longer trust Central Headquarters. There was even the possibility they would try to hinder his actions.

If that wasn't enough, the East Central Branch he belonged to – lacked all kinds of resources in their current state.

In the first place all of their correspondences were being recorded. If Central Headquarters wished to they could find out everything he talked about with Touko. And if they found out it would all fail.

"—No."

Daisuke grimaced, clenching his cellphone.

He was probably the only one in the whole world to know of the worst-case scenario.

"Touko-san."

The will mentioning "I remembered" left by his missing sister.

A certain happening etched deep within Daisuke's memories.

Now that these two facts combined into one, he had to act.

Even though he knew that nothing but despair waited him there—

"Even if I'm gone from the East Central Branch, don't lose against Central Headquarters."

Hearing Daisuke, Touko was at a complete loss of words for a moment.

"Eh...eh? Ehh? W-what do you mean by... hyaa!"

Thump, along with this sound that seemed to indicate something bumped into her, Touko's voice vanished.

"I sense an exterior interference on the circuits."

It was the voice of the intelligence division girl.

"Trying to trace it back to its source – failed. Trying to designate the frequency – failed. Searching for the devices used – failed. Don't mind it, *Maimai*-chan. Assuming this is an intrusion by a Mushitsuki ability. In accordance to the East

Central Branch Secrecy Rule Article 3 Clause 12, *Maimai* will forcibly destroy the corresponding device. Goodbye, *Kakkou-san*."

"Wha...?"

"P.S., isn't it a failure on your part? Don't mind it, *Kakkou-san*."

At the same time as the girl's voice vanishing—

A liquid oozed out the cellphone Daisuke was holding, staining it black. The liquid wriggled, swelling rapidly.

He dropped the cellphone out of surprise, but even before hitting the ground it was crushed to little pieces from the inside.

This was the result of the ability of the girl on the phone, *Maimai*. She was a Special Type Mushitsuki, and her Mushi inhabited all the goggles belonging to East Central Branch members.

"—'I've secured *Minmin*'."

Daisuke turned around as he heard a voice from behind.

"...!"

Black shadows surrounded him on the roof.

"'Kusuriya Chiharu. —*Kakkou-san*. She's your real sister'."

As if replaying a recording, Daisuke and Touko's voice echoed on the roof.

The one to transmit them was a Mushi that swayed its swelling antenna-like feelers. Its body shone with a black luster like a manufactured mirror.

Daisuke immediately pulled out the black long coat in his bag. Throwing the now empty bag away, he wore the standard equipment coat of the East Central Branch.

Does this guy have a wiretap ability—

Aside from the black Mushi, several other Minion Type Mushi also surrounded Daisuke. The humans standing next to them all wore black masks that covered their faces.

They were five people. The number of Mushi he could see was three.

"Where did you hide Horisaki Azusa?"

A long and thin silhouette standing atop the roof of the pump shed opened their mouth. Judging by the voice he was a man, but there didn't seem to be anything Mushi-like near him.



Something buzzed deep inside Daisuke's eardrums.

At some point the sounds of the wind stopped. He couldn't even hear his own steps.

Not only that, but he hadn't even felt the presence of the men in front of him now.

"A Special Class that can erase your presence... Tch, so when you first let me know of your presence was that to make me lower my guard?"

Just like the girl on the phone said it was his failure. Although he had noticed someone was tailing him, when he felt their presence was gone at some point he lowered his guard.

And never mind him being taken by surprise, he even allowed them to eavesdrop and steal his conversation with Touko.

Not only the fact he had apprehended *Minmin*, but he even let them know about the existence of his sister— "Where's Horisaki Azusa?"

The man on the roof repeated.

In this space where all sounds were gone, only the conversation of the people there could be heard.

The ability to control sounds... No, is it a mental pollution type that allows them to specify what sounds can come through...?

While analyzing his opponent's ability inside his mind, he asked back.

"Who're you? Did you come after *Minmin*?"

"I'm asking you where she is."

"Are you the Central Headquarters' Annihilation Squad or whatever? Do you have any connection to Chiharu?"

The Annihilation Squad was said to be an assassination group unofficially managed by the Central Headquarters of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. The team's official name and structure were unknown, but that squad made its appearance every time Central Headquarters made threatening movements.

"..."

"So you won't answer, huh."

Inside the soundless space, a green Cleridae insect flew down.

Daisuke drew a large automatic handgun from the holster hidden in his uniform.

"Seeing you're not answering – you're my enemies."

As if in response to his mutter, the body of the Cleridae insect alighted on his shoulder burst. Countless green tentacles stabbed into his body, assimilating with him as if being absorbed. In his hand, that now showed a green pattern, the handgun became one with the Cleridae insect's jaw.

He could tell the black masks surrounding him grew tense. Perhaps unable to withstand the bloodlust Daisuke emitted, one large Mushi rushed at him.

"You idiot! Don't let go!"

The scolding of the man standing on the roof was erased by gunfire.

The bullet shot by Daisuke's gun crushed the large Mushi that was several times larger to smithereens.

Immediately after this Daisuke's head was assaulted by a loud volume. The tremendous voice made him lose his sense of balance.

"We have no choice... finish him at once—"

While the man was trying to issue instructions, his mouth was obstructed by Daisuke's left hand.

With his superhuman leg strength he had instantly leapt to the roof of the shed.

"So do you control hearing? I'm already used to fighting sensory deprivation-type abilities. It won't work on me."

He sent the man flying with his gun's grip.

Immediately after the masked man was blown away, the sounds around were reborn. As its host fainted, the Mushi's ability was also absolved.

A large shadow covered the area.

From overhead a flat Mushi bent over toward Daisuke. With a body large enough to cover the entire rooftop, it was trying to crush the crane installed nearby along with Daisuke.

Yet immediately after this the large Mushi raised a shrill howl.

Its cry became even louder accompanied by the echoing sound of a hard object breaking down.

In the end its cry turned into death throes.

Daisuke ripped the Mushi's body apart with sheer force. The dying Mushi vanished as if melting into thin air.

His whole body showered by the Mushi's bodily fluids, Daisuke looked around him.

"So I let two escape..."

The desolated rooftop already had no traces of the remaining masked figures. The bodily fluids stuck to his body started vanishing without leaving a single stain.

"If these guys were the Annihilation Squad... it means that Central Headquarters would also know about Chiharu."

Daisuke bit his lips.

—"I remembered".

If his sister's words were true, he had to take action.

"Chiharu—"

He spent of all his time fighting starting from when he became a Mushitsuki and until now.

Now he was called a demon and even acknowledged as a Rank 1, strongest of the Mushitsuki. He wasn't going to lose no matter who his opponent was, and he would survive battles no matter how harsh they were.

Yet this time he could only imagine an ending of despair.

He also knew that he would never be able to accomplish his objective with his power alone.

But even so – none other than Daisuke had to do it.

"..."

Removing the goggles from his head, he threw them at the ground.

The goggles had a function that indicated the position of its owner installed in it. —Daisuke couldn't allow the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau to track him. If Central Headquarters guessed his goal they would probably hinder him. He also couldn't involve the East Central Branch in it.

Gunfire reverberated.

Leaving the goggles destroyed to pieces behind, Daisuke left 'URBAN'.

1.02 Chiharu Part 2

*

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

An intruder barged into the young Kusuriya Chiharu's peaceful days.

It introduced itself as one of the Original Three, Aria Vareï—

"Ready, set, go!"

A daunting girl's voice echoed inside the gym storeroom installed near the sports ground of the municipal Shiou Elementary School.

—No.

It wasn't heard by anyone except for a one young girl inside the storeroom.

"Yes, let's do it."

Kusuriya Chiharu, belonging to Year 6 Class 3 of Shiou Elementary School, reached for the rolled gymnastics mat. At her feet lay the red backpack belonging to her.

"Uah!"

Chiharu raised an idiotic-sounding voice at the weird sensation transmitted to her fingertips.

Her thin finger stabbed into the thick mat.

No, it didn't pierce it. It was also different from being buried in it.

"Yeah yeah, well done. Datch my fushion ability, ijn't it great?"

Fusion – meaning, the mat and Chiharu's finger became one. According to the explanation she received, the *sellyular formation* composing her body or

whatever cut inside the *molekyular structure* or something like this – this was what she was told, but obviously it was all gibberish to her.

"Mm..."

Chiharu puffed her cheeks and detached her hand from the mat. Having used her ability on the mat, it became something akin to jelly, a material that offered a slight resistance with a soft sensation. It first it felt creepy, but once she grew accustomed to it perhaps it actually felt quite nice.

"Why are you speaking like that? If I did it well you have to praise me."

Turning around, Chiharu expressed her dissatisfaction.

There was no one in her line of sight. Only Chiharu was inside the warehouse.

"I did praise you! Or rather, you doing that is natural! Since we became one, fusing parts of your body with other substances should be as easy as breathing! If you do that with your whole body it'll be another problem though!"

"Uu..."

The voice was invisible, yet Chiharu could hear it clearly in her ears to an annoying degree.

The same voice as hers.

The same tone as hers.

And yet it had a mischievous personality quite unlike hers.

Chiharu had found a blue cocoon a few days ago in a vacant lot, and the moment she touched it, *it* snuck inside her.

It introduced itself as Aria Vareï.

"Actually, why aren't you a bit scared of the fusion power? And it was the same when I entered you! You have to be scared in the beginning, saying something like 'have I gone crazy?' or 'I've been possessed by a ghost!', otherwise it's bullying! Take responsibility!"

Chiharu lacked the things known as fear and sense of danger when compared to other boys and girls of the same age. Her strong curiosity and desire to chase everything that caught her interest were stopped by the people around her. She

was often called a "risky child" by her surroundings.

"Eh...?"

Chiharu bumped her back against the wall with a pale face. The flags used for sports day fell down with a crash.

"You were a ghost, Aria...? Oh no... I'm scared..."

"You're well aware I'm not a ghost! What's with that realistic acting for nothing! Now I actually want to die! Ugh!"

"You're the one who's told me to take responsibility. You're so easily annoyed. And stubborn."

In a complete reversal from her frightened acting, Chiharu curled her lips and sat down on the mat.

"I already explained that it's also your fault! Did you forget it already?"

Aria Varei's voice raised a vehement objection.

Yes, Chiharu had received some explanations from Aria so far.

"I didn't. Umm... There's these Mushi that eat people's dreams, and those who are possessed by them are called Mushitsuki right? And you're one of those Original Three guys that create them."

"Yup, I'm a super scary villain right? You can be as scared as you'd like!"

"Unlike the other two, since you can't move yourself, you go inside someone's body and simb...simb... symbiosis? With them and be reborn like that or something."

"I've been totally ignored! Aria's shocked! ...Well, but most of that is true."

"And every time you're reborn your personality changes, right?"

Chiharu confirmed while looking up at the dust-covered ceiling. A somewhat exhausted voice replied to her.

"Yes, my original personality as Aria Varei was already erased from this world long ago. All that remained are instincts. A nonexistent afterimage. My personality as Aria now is a mirror image based off of my host's – meaning your memories and feelings, nothing more than a copy."

"...It's too hard so I don't understand."

"It's fine if you don't understand. After all once your role is over you'll forget everything about me. You'll forget about Mushi too – as well as about the person you will turn into a Mushitsuki. Anything and everything related to Aria Varej."

If Chiharu told Aria its voice sounded lonely, would it become mad?

She hugged her knees and looked down.

"Why will I forget?"

"Because I became like this... is all I can say. But it's because that unlike El and Dio – the other Original Three, I'm always in a state like sleeping. I'm just a wandering dream unknown to anyone – not like a wish, but in the meaning of a dream you see while you sleep; anyway I'm someone who always dreams. Once you wake up you forget your dream... and the dream wanders in search for yet another person. You are simply someone who's gotten involved in my sleep."

"So you've always been sleeping, huh Aria."

Aria made no reply to Chiharu's mutter.

Now that the storeroom was enveloped in silence, the shouts of the baseball club from the playground flew inside. The only clubs to have extracurricular activities in Shiou Elementary School were the baseball and soccer clubs. Perhaps as an influence of the declining birth rates, in recent years they were combined with another elementary school.

"You're really troubling."

Aria's voice said abruptly.

"You need to be scared more... or even resent me, or this will be hard to do."

"Resent you? Why?"

"Asking me why... have you forgotten everything? Me residing in you means that someone close to you that has a delicious dream – and you even know who that dream belongs to! You know you'll also forget about him right?"

"I won't forget."

She said clearly.

Chiharu would never forget. Never. No matter what happened.

"It's impossible."

Aria cut her off with these two words.

"As long as you coexist with me, the 'hunger' will never leave you. And because you'll stay hungry, it'll exhaust you as long as you don't satisfy it. Eventually you will definitely—"

"Is that so?"

"It is! Because everyone that Aria Varei resided in until now were all the same! It's definitely impossible! It's impossible, impossible impossible!"

Chiharu rose from the mat.

If she didn't go back home soon she would make her mother worry.

When she tried opening the storeroom's door, she stopped her hand. —She had an idea. Recalling the sensation from a while before, she concentrated her consciousness.

As if switching herself – or possibly even constructing herself up from scratch, Chiharu was replaced by another Chiharu.

Her hair fluttered as if fanned by the wind. Its color was dyed blue for an instant.

"H-huh? Chiharu...san?"

Chiharu who turned into Aria Varei reached her arm to the door.

Starting from her fingertips, Chiharu's body was absorbed inside the door without any sound. She stopped breathing unconsciously when her face passed through the door, but there was no need for that.

She passed through the still-closed door in the blink of an eye.

"Ehehe, this sure is convenient."

When Chiharu smiled her hair had already returned to its previous black.

"But you've just learned how to fuse for the first time earlier... W-what the

heck! Did you have some hidden training? But hiding from me is simply impossible... h-huh?"

Humming a song to herself, Chiharu walked along to the playground. Her backpack felt chilly, perhaps due to it being left on the ground.

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Chiharu's happy days hadn't changed.

Even though the bizarre neighbor known as Aria Varej had appeared, Chiharu's daily life would keep going like this forever and ever more— "Oh boy... talking about the first Fusion Type Mushitsuki I had given birth to was a mistake."

More than regret, Aria's voice was filled with stronger feelings of resignation.

"Because of that you're not going to ask any further question such as the reason the Original Three were born... And the worst – you now came to hate the act of giving birth to Mushitsuki."

Walking towards the main gate, Chiharu smiled.

"I thought that being serious and threatening you a bit with that story would be fine, but it had the opposite effect. In a certain sense you were already scared of me long ago."

The first Fusion Type Mushitsuki that the person who became Aria Varej had given birth to.

Chiharu had heard about this person from Aria.

"The person the first Aria made into a Mushitsuki... got in trouble, got hurt, suffered, and after losing various things, had his dreams eaten... and died. —I never want to create anyone like that."

She felt as if she could hear Aria's sigh.

"So you can just stay inside me forever, Aria. Isn't it better this way?"

"Forever... huh. —That's quite the nostalgic and difficult request."

"It's easy, it's easy."

Perhaps stunned with Chiharu being this carefree, Aria stayed silent.

When she arrived at the front gate, Chiharu found the face she was the most accustomed to.

It was a child who wore a black backpack for boys and was slightly shorter than Chiharu. He had no special features worth mentioning, but his scowling eyes gazed ahead. She felt as if he always looked at everything like that.

Kusuriya Daisuke.

Chiharu's one and only little brother.

"Dai—"

Just as she tried calling to him, several boys ran past Chiharu's vision. While laughing loudly, these boys who were about Daisuke's height kicked his backpack and rushed through the gate.

Being kicked from behind, Daisuke fell to the ground. Yet the boys only turned around and laughed.

"Hey you!"

When Chiharu glared at them and shouted angrily they just kept laughing. They stuck out their tongues at her, running outside the school gate.

"Those stupid brats... hey, Aria! Do you have any killer technique so I can finish them off?"

"You are strange, Chiharu-san..."

When Chiharu rushed over to him Daisuke got up abruptly. He only glanced at her once and then walked toward the school gate without saying anything.

"Hey, wait, Daisuke...!"

She followed him from behind as he brushed off the sand stuck to his clothes.

"What's up with those idiots...! Daisuke, did you fight with them?"

"Shut up. It's nothing."

Daisuke bluntly asserted, frowning in annoyance. Yet Chiharu was unperturbed.

"If something's troubling you can always tell me! What are their names? I'll definitely take care of them next time!"

"I told you it's nothing! Don't get involved, you're annoying!"

"I'm not annoying! It's normal!"

"Sorry, I don't really think it's normal..."

Daisuke couldn't hear Aria's voice. He separated from Chiharu with a trot, walking slightly ahead.

Normally at this point she would catch up to him and press him for answers.

Yet now Chiharu held back and kept a slight distance between them.

While smiling.

Even though she wanted to approach him, she controlled herself to not get closer more than necessary.

"Say, Chiharu. Isn't it tough?"

Aria said in a tone of mixed emotions.

"Having such an exceptionally delicious dream in front of you."

The surge she could perceive from Daisuke's back.

The sweet, rich, captivating fragrant dream.

It was being emitted by her younger brother.

And his older sister Chiharu craved for it.

"..."

Chiharu's hair swayed.

For just an instant it swayed with a blue-colored ripple.

If she relaxed her attention, she would want to embrace Daisuke from behind.

She would cling to him and wrap her hands around his neck— and put his dream— to her mouth— Yet Chiharu didn't come any closer to him.

She didn't want to lose him, so she didn't reach to him.

"I don't really mind, but don't try too hard for nothing."

Something touched Chiharu's cheeks as she was watching over Daisuke's back.

"If you keep dawdling then he might be snatched away by a greedy someone —"

Becoming puzzled and touching her cheeks, something stuck to her fingertip.

It was something grain-like shining in purple.

Since she had experience in pursuing her curiosity she knew what it was.

It was — a butterfly scale.

*

The living room was enveloped in a silence brought forth by tension.

Chami and Aya's pale faces gazed at Chiharu who was sitting on the sofa while still wearing the swimsuit.

"...And that's as far as I can remember."

Chami became cautiously distant.

"..."

With a sharp gaze Aya forced her way between Chami and Chiharu. The ground beetle that until now was eating cans clung to her slender left arm.

"Ah, it's fine. Aria's no longer inside me. I also have no powers left."

While Chiharu was smiling unworriedly, Chami stayed alert.

"So you used to be Aria Varej, meaning *Sanbikime* – you expect me to believe that contrived story...?"

"*Sanbikime*? Ah, I remember. I heard that the SEPB calls Aria like that. But you made this sort of reaction because you believe me, right Chami-chan?"

Chiharu elegantly sat down on the sofa, pouting. She felt it was rude for them to exhibit such clear fear if they didn't believe her.

"Meaning we can say that the one who turned *Kakkou* into a Mushitsuki was you, his sister?"

"The memories related to that are still vague, but... Daisuke's a Fusion Type

Mushitsuki, right?"

"...Right."

"See. I turned Daisuke into a Mushitsuki. There's no mistake about that."

She looked at her intertwined hands on her knees.

Chiharu turned Daisuke into a Mushitsuki.

Her memories were still incomplete, but she could remember that sensation clearly even now.

That otherworldly delicious flavor—

The amazing feeling she had after having stuffed herself full of it— Chiharu had thrust her brother Daisuke into this hopeless life of having his dreams eaten and being feared by people.

"Daisuke definitely hates me. I believe that he passed painful days ever since becoming a Mushitsuki. And all of that is my fault. If that wasn't enough I'd forgotten all about it and lived happily... Looking at it from his point of view, I believe that once he comes to know of my location he will rush over to kill me."

Chiharu said, smiling.

"That's why, when I meet Daisuke – I'll let him kill me."

Putting herself on guard, Chami's face changed colors. She attached a hand to her forehead and muttered as if brooding.

"...It sounds completely made-up... No, but... if *Sanbikime* gives birth to Mushitsuki, erases the host's memories and moves around like that it would be consistent with there being no eyewitnesses, won't it... Aria Vareii... the prototype Mushi that creates Fusion Types... No way..."

Muttering as she ruminated over Chiharu's explanation, Chami glared at her with a rigid face.

"I thought this was a stupid monitoring mission but... it's absurd. Isn't this something much more valuable than if you were also a Mushitsuki? In a way you're a more powerful card than *Fuyuhotaru*."

Pushing Aya aside, Chami stood up in Chiharu's way.

"But that's only if what you've told us is true."

"Such deep suspicions. How like you, Chami-chan."

"What else did you recall? How about *Oogui* or *Shinpu*'s abilities? —No, we can postpone that for later. What I want to know is the core of everything."

Aya, exchanging looks with Chami, stepped forward in front of Chiharu. She thrust the ground beetle clinging to her left arm at Chiharu's nose.

"What are Mushi – If you really are a former Original Three, I won't let you say you don't know the answer to that."

Chami's sharp gaze and Aya's gaze that showed no emotions. The pair's gazes cornered Chiharu.

Yet she scratched her head with a bashful grin.

"Umm. I actually have no idea."

"—Aya."

"Should I try cutting off about half of her head?"

"Eh, eh, what? Kyaa! There's a strange smell coming from your Mushi's mouth! Is something coming out? If I lose half my head I'll die!"

The head of the flustered Chiharu was grabbed by Chami's hands. She brought her face close and spoke with a serious expression.

"I have no time to screw around. I'm already on the run from the SEPB because I saved you thinking you could become of use to me. I don't know when I'll be killed by an assassin. I can't go back. In order to survive I have no choice but to win. Against that shitty organization called the SEPB."

"C-Chami-chan..."

"In order to win against the SEPB I have to grasp the core better than them. What are Mushi? What are Mushitsuki? I have to find that out and get the jump on them. I will make you into a tool for that purpose. I will have you become my pawn. That's non-negotiable. I won't let you refuse."

Having Chami lean forward and press her with questions, Chiharu was puzzled.

"I also have plenty of things I'd like your help with. Thanks to you I remembered Daisuke, and you also saved me from *Kanata*. But just like I said before, I didn't really want to ask about Aria at the time."

"You think I believe that?"

"I-it's true! But if I'm able to remember other things, maybe I'll become more useful to you, Chami-chan...? Aria talked a lot. If I remember anything I will tell you immediately. Is that not fine?"

She looked at Chami with upturned eyes. The glasses-wearing girl seemed dissatisfied.

"...Tch, I have no choice then. I can't make any flashy moves since I'm injured now, so I have to stay put for a while. If you don't remember anything soon I'll kick you out."

"O-okay. Also, umm, Chami-chan..."

"What now?"

"Now you need to tell me. What's Daisuke doing now?"

Chiharu inquired with a serious expression and Chami's face changed.

"No way you're thinking of making a deal with me, right? That if I don't tell you, you wouldn't hand over any info related to Mushi—"

"N-no! You've got that wrong! It's true that I still can't remember!"

"..."

"Wow, what a suspicious look you have there, Chami-chan! Do I look like someone capable of making difficult stuff like deals?"

Chiharu tried making excuses desperately. Chami sighed.

"You want to know about your brother and meet him... just to be killed by him?"

Chiharu didn't know what happened to Daisuke ever since separating from him five years ago.

She didn't know Daisuke ever since he became a Mushitsuki.

What sort of life was he leading now? Since he was a Mushitsuki he was probably suffering. Chiharu had to know it.

And after knowing of Daisuke's agony, she has to be judged by his hands— "... Yeah."

She smiled.

If Chiharu had a dream – thoughts about wanting to become such and such in the future, this would be her wish.

She didn't have the personality to wish for her own happiness.

Seeing her smile, Chami grimaced.

"...I don't like it at all."

"Huh?"

"Getting killed by your brother... don't go and pick out your death like that. Since you'll become my tool you can't die without my permission. I don't need any disposable pawns. I only need excellent underlings that would be able to stand on the stage until the very last."

Was she basically telling her to not die?

Her words were coarse, but Chiharu felt as if Chami was saying that.

"Well, in your position it would be difficult to avoid being killed by other Mushitsuki even before meeting *Kakkou*, though."

"W-what do you mean?"

"It means that *Kakkou* – Kusuriya Daisuke is hated by many Mushitsuki."

Chiharu widened her eyes.

"That guy's probably the worst Mushitsuki at present, being the person the turn the biggest amount of Mushitsuki into Fallens. He truly is the Mushitsuki's natural enemy, a cruel demon. There's not even one Mushitsuki who isn't afraid of that bastard."

She couldn't understand what Chami was saying and who she was talking about.

But when she realized she was giving her an explanation about Kusuriya Daisuke, Chiharu reflexively raised her voice.

"T-that can't be right! Daisuke's a good kid that understands people's pain!"

"...Your brother obsession is irrelevant right now. I don't know how that guy was five years ago, but at the very least right now he's not good kid or anything like that. Rather he's treated as the worst killer in the world."

Chiharu was dumbfounded.

Sitting on the sofa on the other side, Chami started speaking.

Around four years ago, by turning each and every one of the people to assist the coup d'état attempt on the SEPB's East Central Branch to Fallens, he was able to suppress the rebellion.

He even turned the fearsome Mushitsuki *Fuyuhotaru* into a Fallen and captured her.

Even later he kept capturing numerous Mushitsuki as an SEPB member.

And during last year's Christmas Eve came the final fight with Mushibane. On top of recapturing *Fuyuhotaru* he had killed Lady Bird, who was Mushibane's leader.

He was a demon who deprived countless Mushitsuki of their dreams.

According to Chami, that was Kusuriya Daisuke – Blaze Class Rank 1, the strongest Mushitsuki *Kakkou*.

"Everyone hates that guy. Yet no one can rival him. Although he was at near-death situations countless time he managed to get through all of them. He's even a legend among low-ranked Mushitsuki like me. Kusuriya Daisuke is the kind of guy who would rush straight to the center of any battle involving Mushitsuki."

Contrary to her indifferent expression while explaining this, Chami's tone was mixed with envy and jealousy.

"But as I see it, that demon's also taken care of situations that threatened the entire country countless times. And all by himself. It was like that with the East Central Branch's coup d'état. With *Fuyuhotaru*. And with Lady Bird. —But he's

created so many grudges so that no one wants to recognize that, though."

"..."

"In that meaning, he was probably an essential existence for the SEPB from their point of view. And yet lately his clashes with Central Headquarters are starting become an issue. ...He's probably already served his purpose by defeating Lady and weakening Mushibane. Now that they defeated their biggest enemies, the overly powerful *Kakkou* is actually a nuisance and dangerous for them... But since he's backed by the East Central Branch they can't carelessly make a move on him..."

At some point the words coming out of Chami's mouth became a monologue.

"So Daisuke—"

A shudder welled up from the depth of Chiharu's body.

It's my fault—

Her mind went blank. Feeling dizzy, she shook her head violently.

"H-hey!"

Chami hurriedly supported Chiharu's shoulder.

She felt as if the room temperature suddenly dropped. She was filled with shivers and the trembling wouldn't stop.

What she heard about from Aria and feared five years ago now became reality.

No, it couldn't compare to that.

What her childlike mind feared was just birthing a single Mushitsuki.

But this nightmarish reality was all done by Chiharu's hands—

"Don't think everything's your fault."

"...!"

Chiharu's shoulders shook with a start. Chami peeked into her face with an angry glare.

"Don't be so conceited. If what you said is true, if you were the one who

turned *Kakkou* into a Mushitsuki... that's the only responsibility you should carry. What came later is his responsibility as a Mushitsuki. He did it all by his own decision and his own hands after all."

"B-but...! If I hadn't turned him into a Mushitsuki—"

"I'm telling you that's your conceit. Don't act like you're playing the main role of some tragic heroine."

"I'm not thinking that at all!"

"Certainly there are people who'd think that everything's your fault. No, almost everyone who bears grudges against him will definitely think so. But every last one of them is a spineless baby. They would make their retirement from the stage someone else's fault."

Still grabbing Chiharu's shoulders, Chami frowned.

Chiharu couldn't understand her anger at all. She had no idea what she was baring her hostility against.

"They'd think they lost because of *Kakkou*... and so it's also your fault since you turned him into a Mushitsuki. Then what's next? Is it *Sanbikime*'s fault for choosing you? And who created it? Ha, how many other people they'd need to blame to be satisfied?"

Had Chami noticed Aya making a small nod at her side?

"A Mushitsuki who forgets to fight with their dream ends up losing pitifully and vanishing."

Chami said in a tone full of hatred.

"And yet even those guys who keep averting their eyes are shitty. I don't need such an audience. I'll crush whatever started it all and gave birth to Mushi. If I do that it won't be anyone's fault. I won't be just watching from the side. Serves them right."

Chami, who shouted at herself being cowardly, dirty and weak at 'URBAN' now clenched her fists.

Her aspiration was audacious and outrageous.

But if it came true...

Rather than Chami herself being saved, it would actually mean—

Chiharu could vaguely understand but she didn't let it out of her mouth. Because she knew that if she said that Chami would deny it.

"I'll smash them – even if *Kakkou* possibly thinks the same as me."

"...Huh?"

"After all I only know about *Kakkou* from rumors. I don't know the truth about what's he thinking and trying to do. Small fries like me aren't told everything about such big shots."

As if a switch was pressed, Chami showed her a calm expression.

"What I really can't accept is him killing Lady. Until now *Kakkou* always turned Mushitsuki into Fallens, so why would he kill only Lady... The damage to Hashiba City being so outrageous is also curious. I only believe in the information I get by my own hands. Maybe *Kakkou* didn't kill her—"

Hearing Chami, Chiharu's expression sparkled.

"Then is it possible that Daisuke's actually a really kind and good kid even now?"

"...No, frankly I think that's impossible."

"I'll know if I meet Daisuke right?"

"I won't let you meet him until you fully retrieve your memories. But even bearing that in mind meeting him would be difficult. He's a Blaze Class Rank 1 Mushitsuki. It would take extreme time and efforts even just searching for his whereabouts..."

"So what about someone who directly met with him? If I ask about Daisuke directly from someone who knows him I'll find out the truth right?"

Chami frowned as Chiharu bent her body over. Resting her chin on her hands, she made a bluntly displeased expression.

"Hey now. I don't have any duty to fulfill your selfish requests—"

"If I clear up things about Daisuke I'll also remember the past! Yes, there's no

doubt about that! I suddenly feel like it would work!"

"You... so you *are* trying to make a deal..."

"If you won't help me then I won't tell you even if I do recall everything!"

She puffed her cheeks and turned away. Chami squinted her eyes.

"That's different from what you said before. Meaning you're a traitor. —Aya."

"Since you have four limbs, I feel like you'll be okay even if you lose one of them."

"I lied! It was a joke! I'm sorry!"

Raising her arms at the approaching Aya, Chiharu appealed to Chami.

"Then I'll just ask! For example, I'll ask what kind of a person he is. I won't do anything more than that, I'll just speak about what kind of a person he is. Okay? It'll be just that, really!"

Sighing, Chami restrained Aya with her hand. Sending a side-glance to Aya who seemed slightly disappointed, she started thinking with a "hmm". Perhaps she herself also had an idea.

"Someone who's an acquaintance of *Kakkou*... someone around the level of the East Central Branch's Branch Director would be obvious. But the difficulty of getting in contact with them isn't much different than with *Kakkou*. Other than that there are the people who were once members of the East Central Branch like *Kasuou*, *Nene* or *C*... but they're now all big-shots in Central Headquarters. In a certain sense it would be much more dangerous than contacting *Kakkou*. And I don't want to make *Konoha* move inside the Central Headquarters too much."

It was obvious, but the names that came one after another from Chami's mouth were all unfamiliar to Chiharu. And Chami dismissed all of them anyway.

"Maybe one of the other Rank 1s who have a connection with him... Lady's already dead, Harukiyo – I feel like I'll turn into yakitori just thinking about him. I haven't searched for *that* woman either... Hah, what's with that all-stars roster. They're all people who seem like they would destroy the country if *Kakkou* wouldn't get in their way."

After smiling sarcastically and counting on her fingers, Chami changed her expression.

"...? What's wrong, Chami?"

"There is one... She's also a Rank 1, but that's outrageous. Even the SEPB couldn't control her... She's the Mushitsuki who created the opportunity for Kusuriya Daisuke to become the dreaded *Kakkou*. Although she was once a Fallen she was revived and that monster's on the loose even now...!"

"M-monster...?"

Hearing the term 'on the loose' Chiharu could only think about some wanted criminal. That person had apparently met with Daisuke several times, but it didn't sound like their relationship was good.

Chami gazed at Chiharu and spoke clearly.

"You've also met her. And quite recently to boot."

"...Huh?"

"Secret Class Rank 1 Mushitsuki, *Fuyuhotaru*. —Her real name is Anmoto Shiika."

Chiharu's thoughts stopped for an instant.

It didn't take her long to recall the name of Anmoto Shiika.

—*Ah... it's Anmoto Shiika.*

The girl who lent her money after she had met her in Nishito City by coincidence.

Their meeting was not simply recent. It happened just yesterday.

The silver tower 'URBAN'. For some reason Shiika also appeared in the violent fight that unfolded inside of it. Now that she thought of it, Chami did call the girl who suddenly appeared in the blazing lobby *Fuyuhotaru*. Chiharu has yet to receive the explanation as to why Chami had been fighting a Mushitsuki in that tower.

"Shiika-chan...? Huh? *Fuyuhotaru* is Shiika-chan?"

She was a lovely girl with an innocent face. When she had met her in Nishito

City, she even thought that she'd like to have a little sister like her. Chiharu reflexively retorted.

"That's... that can't be true! Shiika-chan is a kind, cute, good kid!"

"What, did your brother obsession spread to include other people too...? — Doesn't matter if she's good or bad. The problem is the fearsome power she has. Don't be deceived by her looks. That girl seriously possesses power on par with the strongest even among the Mushitsuki. That's why I also targeted her and fought at 'URBAN'. ...I failed, though."

Chami asserted with an unpleased tone. Chiharu was surprised.

"You targeted Shiika-chan just because she's strong? You can't do that! I believed you were a good kid, I'm shocked!"

"Calm down. Also don't just call people good kids like that. —And targeting her only because she's strong is natural. But that's not all; she's also the only Mushitsuki to have revived from the Fallen state. Taking possession of that woman would basically mean seizing the initiative for everything related to Mushitsuki. That's how the world is right now."

"No..."

"Also, don't avert your eyes from the most important matter. —Such a kind, cute and good kid was forcibly captured by your brother two times."

Chiharu was lost for words.

Shiika had handed her money without any hesitation despite her being nothing more than a total stranger.

—But, you look like you really want to go.

This girl who wore a somewhat reserved smile had been hurt by Daisuke twice.

"She's a woman who has more reasons to hate *Kakkou* than anyone. If she finds out you're his sister — as expected I really can't agree to it, but well, you'll be undoubtedly killed. Even if you ask about *Kakkou*, as long as she's not an idiot or some fortunate person you'll probably hear nothing but grudges."

Grudges.

It was obvious. Shiika had the right for that.

"Also *Fuyuhotaru*'s probably closely guarded by Mushibane right now. No matter how you look at it you can't meet up with a Secret Class Rank 1 Mushitsuki so easily."

"Tomorrow there's a large assembly of Mushibane's executives."

A monotonous voice suddenly cut into the conversation.

Chiharu turned around to the white-faced girl.

Sugitsu Aya. —Chami had introduced her to Chiharu as a member of Mushibane.

"Apparently *Fuyuhotaru* will also attend it."

Aya said while petting the head of her ground beetle that started greedily devouring the leg of the fallen table.

"Hah? I didn't hear anything about that! Why didn't you tell me until now, Aya!"

"I got contact from my sister last night. Haven't I told you?"

"Really, what's up with you! Aren't you acting strange lately?"

"Are you worried?"

Aya showed a happy-looking expression for the first time. Chami became lost for words.

Chiharu then inquired Aya.

"So can I... meet Shiika-chan?"

"Taking *Fuyuhotaru* herself would definitely be impossible. If it's just approaching her—"

"Don't be an idiot! I still can't move properly... Also, *Aijisupa* and other Mushitsuki are also going to be there! Someone might have leaked information to the SEPB and they might attack that place aiming for *Fuyuhotaru* in the ensuing chaos—"

"Of course I wouldn't do anything if you don't want to me to, Chami. But

there are plenty of other members gathering there other than the executives. We can hide our faces and I believe the SEPB won't have time to launch an attack. —Also, about the man called *Aijisupa*, you've said that to you he looks to be around the level of Blaze Class Rank 3 or 2, right? I don't believe I'm going to lose to him as I am now."

As Aya explained all this with an extremely natural-sounding tone, Chami stared at her in puzzlement.

"W-what are you talking about? You only have about as much power as a Blaze Class Rank 8—"

"I'm going there either way. Because I'm interested in hearing *Fuyuhotaru's* plans. So I'll comply with your orders regarding Chiharu."

Aya raised her face. She fixedly gazed at Chami from the front.

"I wasn't able to do anything except for taking care of *Owl* until now, but that cat's already gone. I can finally be of use now. Don't leave me alone even after you leave Nishito City. Use me, Chami."

Chiharu looked at Chami again.

"Chami-chan, please!"

Even if asking Shiika would only lead to vituperation.

Even if Chiharu would invite anger and expose her life to danger.

If that allowed her to know the true road that Daisuke had taken...

Then she wanted to know that answer.

"I want to meet Shiika-chan again!"

She couldn't meet Daisuke without knowing anything—

"...Aren't you two aware I'm the one ordering you here?"

Being exposed to two people's gazes, Chami made a solemn sigh.

1.03 Chiharu Part 3

*

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Kusuriya Chiharu's daily life felt like that.

Although she didn't have a father.

Although her mother was always busy and didn't really look after her.

She was fine because she had her younger brother Daisuke.

She went to a school where she had plenty of friends, after school she played however she'd like and then returned to the cramped apartment.

Such days continued.

And nothing changed since then.

It was a pleasant world where she gently swayed and lightly floated just like clouds in the sky.

That was the entirety of the world composing Chiharu's surroundings.

"Wha... Chiharu! In front of you!"

"What're you doing, Chiharu?"

Having her arm pulled, Chiharu stopped her legs.

In front of her eyes a bicycle passed at a great speed.

She apparently reached an intersection at some point on her way to Shiou Elementary School. She absentmindedly gazed into the air while walking and apparently tried to go through the pedestrian crossing in red light.

"..."

As Chiharu stared in puzzlement, her brother Daisuke looked back to her with an astonished face.

"W-what?"

"Ehehe. Thank you, Daisuke."

"Wah, why are you smiling, so creepy..."

As the light turned green Daisuke crossed the road with quick steps.

"Stop following me. Siblings going to school together is embarrassing."

"Why is it embarrassing? It's normal."

Chiharu walked a bit behind Daisuke.

Looking at his back and walking, she noticed that Daisuke has recently grown taller again. She thought he was shorter than her but looking closely there wasn't much difference. His backpack seemed a bit tight. She should loosen the straps a bit when school ends and they go back home today.

Shiou Elementary School was built on top of a large hill. The Kusuriya siblings came from the foot of the hill, so they walked up the road on the slope.

"He's at the age where siblings being close to each other is something embarrassing. He'll get made fun of."

A voice separate from Chiharu's consciousness spoke inside her head.

It was her mysterious roommate Aria Varej.

The other Chiharu with the exact same voice and tone was inside her like usual.

"Isn't that also why he doesn't call you 'onee-chan'?"

Chiharu puffed her cheeks.

No way, it's just a rebellious phase—

She protested against Aria in her mind. Since Aria shared her consciousness she could communicate just by thinking words.

"Yeah yeah. But you know—"

While looking at Daisuke's back, an urge swelled inside of Chiharu.

A sweet aroma drifted from her brother.

That aroma grew stronger daily, increasingly shaking Chiharu's rationality—
About a month has passed since Aria started inhabiting her.

"You sure controlled yourself well. Even though you have such a delicious dream right in front of you."

Daisuke abruptly looked back at her while walking the road up the hill.

Chiharu came back to her senses with a start.

He saw through her 'appetite' – is what she thought.

"Don't come to school tomorrow."

"Eh?"

"Didn't you catch a cold or something? You seem to be out of it lately. Your face's pale, too."

Bluntly asserting this, Daisuke again turned to the front and kept walking.

Since she didn't have a robust body in the first place, Chiharu often caught colds and had fevers, taking days off school. It appeared that Daisuke thought she ruined her body again and worried for her.

See, Aria—

"Ehehe."

Chiharu talked to her neighbor in her heart.

Daisuke's a kind and good kid—

"You're laughing again... so creepy."

Saying this, Daisuke fastened his pace again. The distance between the two grew farther.

While Chiharu was grinning in a good mood, she kept watching his back.

Although they were far, she could clearly see that her brother's backpack had small tears on it. They were being added continuously for a while now. Even Daisuke himself had band-aids on his knees and cheeks.

"I don't know if he's a good kid or not, but I do know that you and him are two

peas in a pod."

"Eh? People say we don't resemble each other though?"

Chiharu asked Aria back with a small voice. That voice probably didn't reach Daisuke and there were few other elementary school students around. Shiou City was worried by its declining population that kept getting worse as years went by.

"You're exactly the same in that you're stubborn and never complain. When you get colds it's because you endure everything until the very limits and so you make your surrounding needlessly worry about you, right?"

"Uh..."

It was right on the mark.

"Even your brother is actually suffering. But he'll never tell you about him being bullied by his classmates."

Right—

It seemed that Daisuke had become a target for ridicule and violence. Chiharu came to know of it by secretly probing into the lower classes.

Furthermore, she heard that Daisuke never retorted back. She heard that because of that the other party got carried away more and more and so they wouldn't stop teasing him.

She also knew why he was being bullied. It was because he had no father.

When Chiharu's young mother was still pregnant with her, she overcame her parents' objections and ended up running away from home to elope with Chiharu's father. However, he had passed away in a traffic accident even before Daisuke was born.

Since their mother was left alone she was pressed by her job for their livelihood and wasn't even invited to parents' day at school. That was also one of the reasons why Daisuke became the target of slander.

The fact that only Daisuke was bullied and Chiharu wasn't was, according to Aria, "because of your personalities". This was apparently because "even if you were bullied you'd stay bright to the extent it would seem like you didn't even

notice it", while Daisuke was "unsociable and cheeky".

Chiharu couldn't bear the fact that just this created such a large difference so that only Daisuke suffered even though the circumstances were so similar. She thought of listing up the boys hurting Daisuke and spanking them hard at some point, but Daisuke not relying on her made her feel a bit lonely.

"He should just pay them back a little bit... but since nothing happens they'll keep bullying him."

"That's why I'm always saying. Daisuke's a good kid that understands people's pain."

"Is that so... I personally think it's somewhat different. It's something like... yeah, you're scared. Extremely scared. None of the Arias until now were this scared."

Chiharu tilted her head.

Scared? Chiharu never thought of Daisuke as scary. That went without saying.

"You siblings really are similar. Daisuke's not retorting not because he's scared of the other boys. —No, rather I don't think he's scared at all. It's just like you not being afraid of me, Chiharu."

"That's obvious. Daisuke's a strong kid who'll never lose against any bully."

"...Never mind being strong or not, it's not just that. Your brother is just like you – he's not scared to get hurt in the slightest. He's not scared of the 'enemy' and not even of getting hurt. Since he doesn't care about himself at all, he doesn't even hate the other party. Just like how you don't hate me, Chiharu."

At some point Aria's tone became serious.

"However, on the other hand, or should I say as a result of that... Anyway, he's thoroughly scared of what *does* scare him. Chiharu, what do you fear? And you'd do anything in order to avoid that, right?"

Hearing that, Chiharu held her tongue.

The thing she was scared of.

She wanted to avoid Daisuke becoming a Mushitsuki – to avoid giving him a

life full of agony and despair just like the Fusion Types of the past.

And in order to protect him – just like Aria said, Chiharu would probably do anything.

For that sake she didn't mind how much she got hurt or how much she would be consumed by Aria's dream-seeking habit.

"...It's too difficult so I don't really understand."

She didn't like confirming it so she tried saying this. Aria didn't mind it however and continued.

"Your brother is surely the same. He won't do anything when he's attacked, but if – when he finds some 'reason', I wonder what'll happen. I'm afraid of that. He doesn't fear any enemy and doesn't mind himself getting hurt. If someone like that turns into a Mushitsuki and finds a reason to fight... I can't even imagine how strong he'll become."

"And that's why I'm saying I won't turn him into a Mushitsuki."

"E-even if you don't want to, look, this and that is different. Even you'd like to try eating such a delicious dream, right Chiharu? Just gulp it all down in one bite, right?"

"No way. I'm not some kind of Dracula."

"If Daisuke becomes a Mushitsuki even his wounds will heal in a flash. Isn't it a bargain?"

"Really?"

"Because Fusion Type Mushitsuki literally become one with their Mushi, they're slightly different than other Mushitsuki. It's like their bodies are remade from scratch? Ah, but it might be useless in the case of disease. Since a person's bodily functions become weird due to their bodies being remade even I'm not sure what would happen. I've never turned any sick person into a Mushitsuki."

"Still no though. You won't deceive me like that."

Aria's "tch" of disappointment overlapped with the sound of bells.

They could see Shiou Elementary School's main gate.

Daisuke passed through the gate a step ahead and entered the premises.

"Ah, I'll be late—"

Wanting to pursue him, Chiharu's legs suddenly stopped.

A purple glow suddenly passed her line of sight.

How long was she there?

How long was it like this?



In front of the school gate—

A tall woman wearing a crimson long coat—

Was gazing intently at Daisuke inside school—

—And stood still.

"Uu..."

Cold sweat started being emitted from Chiharu's entire body. Just by glancing at the woman once her thoughts were paralyzed. What made her react this way was bottomless fear.

"Uuh..."

Her body frozen with fear, she couldn't move as if affected by sleep paralysis.

Since she had become one with Aria Varej, Chiharu's instincts informed her that this woman, who was covered by purple glowing scales, who fluttered her crimson long coat, who wore sunglasses that concealed pupils shining in the colors of the rainbow, was definitely not a mere human – no, she wasn't a human at all.

After seeing off Daisuke with a gaze that looked as if she was licking her lips, the woman turned her rainbow-colored eyes to Chiharu.

"—How do you do? You have quite the lovely appearance *this time*, Aria Varej."

The woman whispered with a charming voice. She walked closer to Chiharu without the sound of any footsteps.

Chiharu's heart beat violently. She couldn't stop shivering and no voice came out.

"Oh boy, so you found me as I expected. As I thought you'd never miss such a delicious dream, Elviolene."

The Aria inside Chiharu replied in a light tone.

It seemed the woman could hear Aria's voice. While walking slowly, Elviolene jeered.

"Until it ripens to the best flavor—"

"—There's still some time."

"If you don't it eat until that happens—"

"—Then you will."

"For the times we desire the same dream, this is—"

"—Our rule."

"For you to go to sleep again—"

"—For you to keep on eating."

"Let us conduct a competition."

"Let's have a competition."

Elviolene's long legs finally reached next to Chiharu. As her teeth chattered and her face was downcast, the woman's lips approached her ears. Feeling her sweet breath, the hairs on the nape of her neck bristled.

"You can't lose to Aria's maliciousness, right Chiharu-chan?"

Chiharu's shoulders trembled with a start.

"Your brother Daisuke-chan... please give me his delicious dream."

She left this whisper with a smile.

The oppressive woman's presence that coiled around Chiharu was gone.

As if she was a nothing but a daydream, Elviolene suddenly disappeared.

Although the bells indicating the start of school reverberated, Chiharu—

"...Elvio...lene..."

Couldn't move even a single step from that location, frozen stiff.

*

She was able to remember a little.

From the period when Ayukawa Chiharu was still Kusuriya Chiharu.

The memories of the time when Aria Varej still inhabited her body.

"What's wrong?"

Turning to look at Chiharu was a white mask designed like a squirrel. Since Chiharu was distracted, she was startled.

They were in the underground of a business hotel under construction that formed a vast parking lot. The main building above ground was only steel beams right now, but the premises were strangely spacious. Once construction is completed it would probably be a fittingly large building.

Meanwhile, the underground parking space was apparently one step ahead in construction. The space spanning four floors underground already had temporary lines that divided parking spaces drawn.

"No... I just recalled more of the past. Only a little bit though."

Remembering why she was there, Chiharu feigned calmness. She similarly wore a white mask designed like a deformed cat that hid her face.

"I see. You should tell Chami about it later."

The squirrel-mask wearing girl – Sugitsu Aya – said seemingly disinterested, turned to the front and started walking. Chiharu followed suit.

The pair came to the place where Mushibane's assembly was scheduled to be held.

Aya came there to learn of *Fuyuhotaru's* plans for the future and Chiharu snuck there to make contact with that very same girl. Since Aya was treated as one of Mushibane's executives, Chiharu was able to enter the premises without undergoing a harsh checking as her companion, arriving at their current position.

"Still, it's quite dark and ominous. Can you hold my hand, Aya-chan?"

Chiharu and Aya were walking through what used to be an underground road for automobiles. It seemed the power supply for the illumination was still imperfect so only the emergency lights were on. The meeting place was in the lowest floor.

"I wonder if *Fuyuhotaru's* Mushi really glows like a firefly. It sounds pretty."

"It sure sounds cute from the name *Fuyuhotaru*. ...That's not what I was talking about though..."

The ones heading underground weren't just Chiharu and Aya. People who wore animal masks just like them, and those who didn't mind and revealed their faces, and at times cars with smoke-covered windows were also heading down.

Conducting a secret assembly like this in a sealed space also felt dangerous, but according to Aya since it was still under construction there were other ways to escape. They have apparently secured escape routes in case of an attack. It was said that the owner of the building was a Mushibane collaborator.

"Chami-chan was angry until the end huh. I wonder if she was worried about us?"

Chami effectively agreed to Chiharu's request to let her meet *Fuyuhotaru*.

But in order to reach that conclusion she had had a violent quarrel with Chiharu. Chami probably wanted to avoid the danger of losing Chiharu before being able to draw any information out of her. But she wanted to directly ask *Fuyuhotaru* – Anmoto Shiika about her brother no matter what.

In the end Chami folded in to Chiharu's selfishness or rather tantrum.

But there were some conditions.

Chiharu's face was known by Shiika and *Aijisupa*. Therefore, she couldn't remove her mask nor show anyone her real face.

Never leaving Aya's side was also part of the conditions. In the unlikely event that she tried to escape Aya would kill her. When Chami said this it was obvious from her face it was not a mere threat.

—Even if you do see Fuyuhotaru's face, it doesn't mean you can come close to her and talk to her. It would be too rash to be worth it. ...But I do want you to retrieve your memories as soon as possible. In a certain sense you can act so rashly now that we just disappeared and the SEPB has yet to search the entire country.

Chami, staying to rest in the hotel for her injuries, told this to Chiharu.

—If your lost memories contain something about the mystery of Mushi then it's worth making this bet. Since we don't even know Kakkou's whereabouts, if

you retrieve your memories by meeting up with Fuyuhotaru it would be great. In exchange, if you don't end up recalling anything you know what'll happen you.

She didn't know. In case she didn't remember anything what sort of punishment would Chiharu receive?

At any rate, they had this kind of exchange, and that was how she was allowed to go along with Aya.

"I don't hate Chami getting angry at me."

Walking on the front, Aya said without even looking back.

Chiharu's expression stiffened.

"I-is that so. You sure like Chami-chan, huh."

"Chami's always angry."

"..."

"She doesn't like Mushi, Mushitsuki, the SEPB, Mushibane, or anyone else acting selfishly. Because she's the one who does it."

Aya's tone was indifferent and monotonous. But Chiharu could tell she completely trusted Chami.

"...Say, what's your dream, Aya-chan? For some reason I became extremely interested in it suddenly."

Chiharu asked the back of the school uniform-wearing girl.

She was girl whose every action was mechanical, not allowing anyone to perceive her emotions. Chiharu wanted to peek into the wish hidden in her heart.

"I wanted to meet someone who would look only at me. Because being all by myself is lonely."

This time she replied with a clear answer.

"But, even if it doesn't come true – I don't mind."

"Huh?"

"Even if there was a person who will only look at me, I believe they'll soon

start to annoy me. That would surely be just me pushing my self-conceit on someone."

For some reason – Chiharu's heart throbbed.

"And so I like Chami. Because she's sometimes cold and sometimes kind. And so when she's kind I feel very happy. Chami looks not at me, but at something much bigger – but she sometimes also looks at me. Even though I know I'm only being used I like her."

Aya's spoken words were monotonous and had no hesitation. It was probably something that she found unnecessary to explain even if Chiharu didn't ask her.

"I believe that I'll someday die to help Chami. Since she has plenty of other pawns and only looks at the future, she doesn't even turn around to look at me and will soon forget me. But someday, by some whim, she would end up recalling me for a bit. Yeah – just like that cat. Just by thinking of that moment I will do anything for Chami."

"Y-you'll die...? No, Aya-chan—"

"I hate being loved the most. It's annoying. But if I'm someone's umpteenth favorite and they'd end up recalling me for an instant, just for an instant – I will like them."

Perhaps she was no longer even aware she was telling that to Chiharu. The words coming of her mouth were so pure to the extent it would make one think that.

Without knowing what to say, Chiharu tilted her head.

And so she frankly voiced what she thought.

"I also like you, Aya-chan. I don't know what number you are though."

She said to Aya's back, grinning.

She couldn't really understand Aya's sensitivity to being liked the most. She thought it was the result of a very difficult reasoning, but more than anything it was frank.

Chiharu could only call her a mysterious girl, but at the very least she didn't hate her.

"I see."

Aya suddenly stopped in place. She turned around and lifted her squirrel mask.

"If so then I'll also start liking you."

She said, looking at Chiharu with her black eyes. She immediately put on her mask again and started walking.

The surprised Chiharu stood stock still.

"I-I'm not sure what to think about that way of being liked..."

Confused by her sudden words – without realizing the meaning of her words, she hurriedly rushed following her.

But she was assaulted by an unexpected impact and staggered.

"Ah—"

A small person rushing down the road bumped into her.

The person that bumped into her lost their balance even more than Chiharu. Unable to stop their momentum, they bumped their head into the wall.

"A-are you fine? I'm sorry!"

Chiharu tried rushing at them, flustered, and the white masked figure unsteadily separated themselves from the wall.

"[Rin has self-destructed] – [Rin has received 12 damage]..."

"Huh...?"

Judging from their young voice they appeared to be a boy. But from the largely exposed skin shown from his cube shirt and leather pants he seemed quite delicate.

"Sorry, miss... [Rin apologized]—"

Rubbing his forehead beneath his mask, the boy lowered his head. Just like that he disappeared running down to the next floor without waiting for Chiharu's reply.

"We have to hurry, it's about to start."

Without even looking at the boy that passed next to Chiharu, Aya turned around to her.

"R-right."

Now that they've walked for several minutes, they finally reached the lowest floor.

"Wow..."

Chiharu unconsciously raised a small voice at the bizarre scene spreading out in the underground gloomy space.

A large amount of people were standing at the parking lot that had countless concrete pillars. There were many who hid their faces with white masks, but judging from their uniforms and figures it was obvious many of them were young boys and girls.

Here and there were also people who seemed to be adults. Some people opened the electric windows of their cars to check the situation and there were also people standing while supporting their motorcycles.

Aya pulled the arm of the overwhelmed Chiharu. They cut across people to get to the dead center of the underground parking space.

"U-umm, Aya-chan... I think we shouldn't stand out too much."

"It's because my eyes aren't too good."

Chiharu realized that the gazes of the masked people concentrated on the pair walking in a straight line to the center. Yet Aya didn't seem to mind them at all. Some people called out "yo, Aya" upon seeing her, but she ignored all of them.

Farther back into the parking lot there was a scaffold installed to construct lighting. An iron plate was laid out above the pipes built with three stages.

Chiharu and Aya stopped in the exact middle between the entrance to the underground parking lot and these scaffolds.

Clanging footsteps echoed while climbing up the scaffolds.

As the many white masks watched attentively, several men and women

climbed and revealed themselves.

—It started.

"Second from the left is my older sister, Sugitsu Matsuri."

Most of the people on the platform didn't wear any masks. When she was told so by Aya, Chiharu saw a girl who certainly had the same atmosphere as her.

"She looks like you, she's pretty."

"I wouldn't go that far... here's fine."

Saying with a tone unchanged from the usual, Aya sat on the spot. Without minding her clothes getting dirty she fiddled with a lump of coal on the ground as if saying she had no interest in what was happening.

"*Fuyuhotaru* appeared."

How could she tell despite only looking down?

When Chiharu raised her face, just like Aya said, a girl familiar to her showed herself.

She looked just like when saw her at the Nishito City station – and when she ran into her at Urban Tower as well; she was a girl who seemed so ephemeral one would think she'd disappear upon touch. Even the ribbon binding part of her bangs was the same as then.

Anmoto Shiika.

The kind girl that had given Chiharu money despite being a complete stranger.

And as Chami said – she held the strongest power among existing Mushitsuki as *Fuyuhotaru*.

The white masks started clamoring just from Shiika showing herself. More than them being surprised it was fear. Several people even drew back.

"Shiika-chan..."

Among the executives that moved away only one stayed standing near Shiika. Chiharu recognized even him.

It was the boy known as *Aijisupa*. In contrast to the disturbed white masks he wore an expression without a shred of interest. His sleepy eyes made him look like he was about to yawn.

"Everyone, please be quiet."

A voice rose from the edge of the platform made by the scaffolds. It came from a suit-wearing middle-aged man.

"He's Munakata Kaiji. He's this building's owner and also something like Mushibane's patron."

Aya explained while squashing pieces of coal with her fingers.

"Today we have gathered the remaining members of South and West, a large portion of East and the few members of North, as well as each area's executives. Obviously there are many people who weren't able to attend, but the earlier we stop Mushibane from breaking up the better. North Leader is also absent, but we have confirmed that fundamentally the decisions made today will be followed."

The deep voice of the man known as Munakata reverberated around the underground parking lot. The white masks' clamoring gradually quieted.

However—

"Originally I have worked behind the scenes to prepare this place in order to prevent Mushibane from falling apart. Ever since losing Lady, Mushibane has lost its functions as an organization. Since we have lost our leader we will surely be trampled by the SEPB soon. I believe there is only one way to protect against that, which is the reorganization of Mushibane – to work in a new form under a new leader."

Munakata turned to face *Fuyuhotaru*, speaking clearly.

"And so, I thought of recommending *Fuyuhotaru* as our new leader."

All of a sudden the underground raised an uproar.

Voices of confusion and anger echoed about, making the place fall into a state of disorder.

"A-Aya-chan! Things look bad!"

Covering her ears, Chiharu looked at Aya sitting at her feet. But she only rolled the next lump of coal into her hands with feigned ignorance.

However, the place became suddenly quiet by something unexpected.

Shiika took a step forward.

With just that action the white masks became speechless. Although to Chiharu she only looked like a lovely girl that made her want to pet her head, it was apparently different for the others. What brought the disorder under control was a pure emotion – fear.

"U-umm..."

When Shiika timidly uttered her first words no person dared make any noise.

"I'm... not strong like Rina, and I'm not really a person who could... give you orders and stuff like that, so I'm not sure if I can become your leader. But since Munakata-san told me to speak about what I am thinking in front of you all, I will do so."

Inside the perfect silence she spoke with her face downcast.

"—I do not want to fight against the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau."

The moment she uttered this sentence...

It was obvious the area was enveloped by a cold tension.

That no one let out any voice was probably due to shock. Shiika also seemed to understand this. She mouthed her next lines before disorder would reemerge.

"Most of the SEPB members are Mushitsuki just like us. So why must we fight against fellow Mushitsuki?"

Her face was still downcast, but she kept going desperately.

"There's this person called Shirakashi Ubuki. She's the one who had rescued me from the SEPB. She's a member there, but she told me that she doesn't like fighting. However, since the SEPB had deprived her birthplace she has to follow their orders. —I believe that most of the other members are also like that. We

fight despite none of us wishing for it..."

"—Stop with the lip service."

A voice that felt like it couldn't hold it in any longer rose from the side.

It came from one of the executives who stood on the platform, a rough-seeming guy. Perhaps injured, he had bandages wrapped around his head.

"He's Kandori Youichi. East Leader. His name here is *Sinica*."

Aya promptly explained.

"Are you an idiot? Just the day before yesterday we've been attacked by the SEPB, so how can you say that? Even if we don't want to fight, the SEPB feels differently!"

"Even the person who attacked that time... seemed to be suffering. He called himself a worthless soldier..."

"Ah? Don't fuck with me, I almost died there!"

As Youichi was trying to corner Shiika, *Aijisupa* wordlessly stood in his way. *Pssh*, along with the sound of air bursting both his arms were covered by a white cloud.

Shooting a side-glance toward Youichi who flinched in place, *Aijisupa* turned toward Shiika.

"It seems like you should've started with a more concrete talk. Should I explain instead of you?"

"U-umm... can you please?"

"I can do that much."

Aijisupa turned to face the audience again, and started explaining with a clearly troubled tone.

"Her idea is this. What we do won't change from the time when Rina – Lady Bird was alive. We'll find Mushitsuki faster than the SEPB and protect them. But even if by that process we do end up fighting the SEPB, Mushibane won't launch any attacks to the best of our ability. We'll protect Mushitsuki and promptly withdraw. There will be times we can't avoid attacking, but these will be the

exception. Explaining it so even an idiot could understand, we'll protect and run away – that's all we'll do."

"Not launch any attacks you say...!"

"Of course, devoting ourselves to defense without defeating the enemy is useless if we're not stronger than them. So we'll greatly cut down on our combat personnel and select only the best. Those who leave themselves to emotions and ambush the enemy will be in our way. All the other members will combine their abilities to support the combat personnel, devoting themselves to securing the protected Mushitsuki."

Aijisupa declared indifferently while glancing at the glaring Youichi.

"Anyhow, you probably all thought 'we won't lose as long as we have Lady' until now. From now on abandon such naïve thoughts."

"*Aijisupa*-san, your way of saying that..."

Shiika interrupted him, but *Aijisupa* had a composed face. Youichi clenched his teeth.

"Running away and doing nothing even while watching your comrades finished off from the side...!"

"If you retaliate won't you also be done for? Wasn't it like that until now? So from now on think that it'd be your own fault for failing to protect your comrades. If you don't want it to be that way then grow stronger. By becoming stronger and protecting your comrades, you'll also be able to protect yourself."

Even Chiharu could tell from his way of saying this he was pushing the issue aside.

"You're free to follow Lady to the grave if you want to, but I can't bear you saying that everything is 'because Lady's dead' and making your death her fault too. I wasn't able to protect her, but I'll at least fulfill my responsibility. By protecting this girl."

He spoke indifferently with a cold tone, but Chiharu finally realized.

Aijisupa was actually – angrier than anyone there.

He was angry at the white masks that weren't able to protect the person

known as Lady. As well as angry the same way at himself.

"There will definitely be sacrifices. But if we devote ourselves to defense we'll be able to suppress them to the minimum. While we continue our defenses, strong Mushitsuki will also become our allies. We can build up our power. And on top of that—"

Aijisupa turned to look at Shiika.

Shiika nodded and raised her face. Completely different from before, she clearly declared toward everyone in the parking lot.

"We will find the Original Three and defeat them."

This time...

A perfect silence enveloped the underground parking space.

"In addition, I intend to find out what Mushi are. We will stop the fights between Mushitsuki and start a fight to defeat the very concept of Mushi itself."

Shiika bit her lips.

"I believe it will be a painful fight. Much more than fighting the SEPB... I don't want to see any more Mushitsuki be lost in the middle of their dreams."

Saying this, Shiika – the strongest Mushitsuki that spoke of herself as weak, deeply lowered her head.

"I ask you. Please lend me a hand. I believe it will be a hard fight, much more than not retaliating to attacks, much more than fights between Mushitsuki... Much more than having your Mushi killed and become a Fallen and even more than losing your lives. But if anyone is willing to help me—"

Chiharu noticed that while Shiika lowered her head with her hair hanging down, her shoulder was slightly shaking.

She was scared of fighting.

It was scary to invite other Mushitsuki to a fight.

Yet Shiika endured the anxiety and fear and tried facing ahead even so.

"I swear that in order to end the fighting... I will fight until the end."

Now that the space returned to be deadly silent, the voices of people whispering to each other flew around like ripples.

Youichi seemed like he was desperately fighting against something inside himself. His face distorted and his fist shook. Confused voices of "can we even do that...?" were heard from the surroundings.

"Hey, Aya-chan."

Chiharu smiled at the girl sitting at her feet.

"As expected, Shiika-chan really is a kind and good kid."

Aya only replied "is that so" indifferently.

Shiika still had her head lowered.

The bewilderment around was yet to settle down. No voice was raised to agree with her. *Aijisupa* clicked his tongue and reached his hand to make Shiika raise her head.

"...Do you also not mind unbelievably weak Mushitsuki?"

A voice with a slight fear echoed from near the entrance to the parking lot.

Turning back, Chiharu saw a person showing themselves from among the many white masks. She wasn't wearing a mask, exposing her sharp eyes and mouth. She was also apparently injured as her right arm was in a cast dangling from her neck, supported by a strap.

The suit-wearing woman who seemed to be around her twenties didn't raise her anguished face.

"Regardless of the fact I had once sworn to protect you... will you still accept even someone like me who couldn't do it...?"

All people on the platform looked at the woman. Munakata raised his voice with a surprised expression.

"*Namie?*"

She kept appealing with a shaking voice.

"I wasn't able to protect you. Although I had sworn four years ago that protecting you is justice itself, I wasn't able to accomplish it. Even though I can't

face you now and even though I'm powerless, will you still take me along to your fight...?"

Shiika raised her face.

She was baffled for a while, but perhaps recalling what lay in the woman's words, she widened her eyes in surprise.

"You're... that woman from back then...?"

Seeing that Shiika remembered, the woman known as *Namie* bit her lips.

Even Shiika on the platform hesitated speaking. Yet before long the girl timidly asked.

"Will you help me...?"

"...!"

The woman raised her face for the first time. The next moment, she was amazed to see Shiika deeply lowering her head.

"Thank you very much..."

Before her eyes *Namie's* expression warped. Large tears started falling from her eyes.

"This time...! This time I will really protect you...! I will definitely protect you...!"

The woman squeezed out a shaking voice.

Aya spoke at Chiharu's feet.

"She's Takakuwa Minori. She was on the verge of death from grave injuries and Lady saved her, overcoming her comrades' opposition. She has recently finally regained her consciousness. —I don't know what happened four years ago, but until last year she monitored *Fuyuhotaru* at the Fallen facility in Hashiba City."

Chiharu knit her eyebrows.

"She used to be a member of the SEPB's East Central Branch. Quite the veteran Mushitsuki. Calling herself weak is unthinkable. She was apparently once even designated Blaze Class Rank 3."

Aya added "when Chami heard about her she set her eyes on her, but she ended up being caught by *Fuyuhotaru* huh" seemingly bored.

The other white masks also appeared to know about Takakuwa Minori. The commotion was growing larger.

"...I have a condition."

The one to say this as if wringing the words out of his throat was Youichi.

"Even if I forgive anyone else, I will never forgive that piece of shit..."

In front of Chiharu, the boy had his face distorted with hatred.

In front of none other than Chiharu – Yoichi shouted the following.

"I will definitely kill only *Kakkou*!"

"...!"

Chiharu had never seen before – so many people hating another person, such a murderous impulse directed at another person.

"No matter what happens, I will kill *Kakkou* just like he killed Lady! And it's not just her! Do you even know how many of our comrades were gone by his hands, *Fuyuhotaru*! —No, even you obviously hate him! Say, can't we start everything after killing him! Now's our chance!"

Seeing the boy rave like that in front of her eyes, Chiharu felt a shudder welling up inside her.

The instant *Kakkou*'s name came out the underground parking lot turned into a crucible of angry roars. People unanimously spat out abusive language directed at him.

The one they were currently cursing was none other than Chiharu's brother.

Her brother known as Kusuriya Daisuke gathered hatred from that many people.

"Uuh..."

She barely withstood this shock that made her cover her ears.

With the utmost effort she exerted power into her legs that seemed liable to

fall.

If this really is the hatred that Daisuke gave birth to, Chiharu had to accept it — "Our chance? What do you mean, *Sinica*?"

As the puzzled Munakata asked this, Youichi returned him a warped smile.

"Starting yesterday, that piece of shit – *Kakkou* went missing! Even the SEPB can't get in contact with him!"

"...!"

Including Chiharu, every person there gulped.

"Since he doesn't get the support of the SEPB, if we find him we can kill him! How about it, a once in a lifetime chance! If I can kill *Kakkou* then I'll help you or whatever!"

The white masks raised loud, angry roars all at Youichi's words.

"*Sinica*...! Where did you get that intel from—"

Even Munakata's question was erased by the people's voices.

Shiika bit her lower lip sadly. *Aijisupa* looked down at the white masks with a cold expression, and *Namie* who walked closer to Fuyuhotaru sent a vigilant look around.

The murderous intent directed at *Kakkou* filled the underground parking lot.

"Shiika-chan—"

The people's anger and hatred were about to rip Chiharu's heart apart.

Yet she couldn't ever accept that. In the depths of her heart she wanted to believe her brother was not such a horrible person.

"Shiika-chan...!"

She desperately looked up at the girl on the platform.

Even while about to be crushed by the wave of white masks that was trying to reach *Fuyuhotaru*, Chiharu looked only at Shiika.

If he was hated even by that kind, strong girl – Chiharu could finally give up.

"Shiika-chan!!"

She shouted, forgetting herself.

Shiika raised her face with a twitch. She looked around at the white masks.

"Is Dai—*Kakkou* really such a...!"

Chiharu's voice was drowned out by an explosive roar.

A large hole suddenly opened in the ground near the scaffold Shiika was standing on. Not to mention the ground supposed to be there, several dozen pillars and the wall also evaporated without leaving any trace "Silence, you idiots. You ended up like this because you're an untrained mob."

A Mushi fluttered while leaving white traces behind it, landing atop *Namie*'s shoulder.

Aijisupa sighed in the ensuing silence.

"Just when we are about to enter a 'fight to not fight'... we've gotten quite the short-tempered comrade."

"You as well. Since you're at *Fuyuhotaru*'s side make an effort to respect her will. She can't speak up."

Shiika stood flustered in the center of the two quarreling people. Aya added "someone of the level of Rank 3 protecting the Rank 1 *Fuyuhotaru*... well, it's fine as long as they don't stand in Chami's way" in a mutter.

"I've made a promise with *Kakkou*-kun."

With the gazes of the white masks gathering on her, Shiika calmly began to speak.

"To never give up our dreams..."

No lies could be felt from Shiika's voice that sounded as if she was reciting a song. She believed in the fact she believed in the other party and they believed her too— "Ever since we made that promise four years ago, *Kakkou*-kun kept fighting. Now he might perhaps be nothing but an enemy, but he is also trying to end the battle. That's why when I'm able to find the Original Three, at that time—"

Shiika clearly asserted with an unhesitant tone.

"I believe we'll be able to combine our powers with *Kakkou*-kun – with the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau."

Silence.

Just like the calm before the storm.

"Not only do you not want to fight the SEPB... but you also want to combine our powers with them...!"

"Frankly speaking I'm also not sure about *Kakkou* or whatever. But we have to put up with that. Because if we can't surpass our hatred now, living past the battles ahead would be impossible."

The words uttered by *Aijisupa* became the trigger.

Including Youichi, a large amount of the white masks all raised voices of anger. There were people advocating to take revenge against *Kakkou*, with some of them also blaming *Fuyuhotaru*.

"Staying here any longer is dangerous. Let's get away."

Aya rose up. Pulling the dazed Chiharu's hand, she turned her body.

"B-but..."

Chiharu turned toward Shiika on the platform.

She realized more than enough about Mushibane's hatred toward Daisuke.

But hearing Shiika's words, she once again didn't know anything about him.

The girl that said she had made a promise with her brother and wanted to one day combined their powers – Shiika definitely knew the real Daisuke. She realized that, but she was yet to ascertain if Shiika's attitude was due to her overcoming her hatred or due to some other reason.

"Do you really think we can approach *Fuyuhotaru* like this?"

Aya was calmness itself.

"Also, you've shouted *Fuyuhotaru*'s real name just now. —Even now some people are looking at us."

"...!"

"If the executives know of it we'll be in trouble. Let's run away while the place is in disorder."

Contrary to her looks Aya was strong. Chiharu had no choice but to be dragged along to the entrance of the underground parking lot.

"They're following from behind. Quickly."

Aya said without looking back, heading up for the expressway that connected to the surface.

"R-right!"

Chiharu ran strenuously as she was out of breath.

While climbing the gloomy road, bright sunlight shone in. They could see the exit of the underground parking lot ahead.

"*Gensis*? Is the assembly over already?"

Seeing Aya's figure, two white masks standing in the boundary between the parking lot and the surface raised their voice. They were the guards in charge of doing body checks to those who entered the building.

"Yeah."

Asserting this shortly, Aya tried passing through the exit with Chiharu.

But just before that they heard a voice from behind.

"Wait! Stop them! There's something we need to check!"

Turning around, there were two white masks rushing at them from behind.

Aya's legs stopped.

Although puzzled, the white mask guards stood in the pair's way.

With the exit in front of their eyes, Chiharu and Aya became sandwiched between four people.

"What does this mean? Did you do something, *Gensis*?"

"*Gensis*... who's that with you? She used another name to refer to *Fuyuhotaru* just now, but if that's her real name only the executives are supposed to know it..."

Aya left Chiharu's hand she was grasping. Her almond eyes calmly gazed at the white masks.

"..."

"Why won't you answer?"

"A-Aya-chan..."

In contrast to the tense Chiharu, Aya's expression was unchanged.

"Hey, contact the executives and make sure. Call *Halen* or *Sinica*—"

"I won't let you contact them."

Asserting with an unchanging tone, Aya swung her left hand to the side.

At some point a small ground beetle alighted on her fingers. It instantly swelled its body and clung to Aya's left arm. Black gas started spilling from its elastic mouthpart.

The white masks grew agitated at this preparation for battle. They also materialized their own Mushi.

"You... what're you doing! Do you intend to betray us, *Gensis*!"

"You can just shut up and let us pass. I never thought of Mushibane as comrades, but it wasn't like that with you right? I'll just warn you for now."

Aya's words were completely unchanged from the usual. Just by that she felt intimidating.

The white masks seemed perturbed. But seeing that one of them pulled out a wireless transmitter from their pocket, Aya pushed Chiharu's back.

"Run."

"Eh...?"

"Quickly."

Just as she was told, Chiharu kicked the ground. Passing next to the white masks, she aimed for the exit.

"We won't let you!"

She heard a shout from behind.

Wriggling its innumerable legs, a Mushi cut around in front of Chiharu. As she stopped without thinking, a gust of wind passed by her side.

Along with the knocking of light footsteps, the figure of a person landed atop the Mushi in the front.

It was Aya. —Chiharu had no idea when she had managed to overtake her and jump on top of the large Mushi.

By the point in time she stood on top of the Mushi, Aya held aloft the hand her ground beetle clung to.

Her long hair fluttering, she swung her left arm directly downward.

"...!"

The tremor caused Chiharu's body to float for an instant.

A white flash surged from the ground beetle's mouthpart, piercing the large Mushi. It was probably something with an extremely high pressure, as nothing was left of the Mushi pierced by the stake shining in pure white. A sizzling smoke rose from the large hole opened in the ground.

"Wha—"

The white masks were astounded. One person in the back lost his strength and slumped to the ground.

"*Gensis*, you...!"

With an angry voice, two Mushi assaulted Aya.

The jaw of a Mushi tried biting her, yet she evaded it like a cat – no, with even more instantaneous force than that and cut to the side. She thrust her left hand at two Mushi from an angle where both of them were lined up.

A green stake was launched from the ground beetle's mouthpart. The luster-emitting thick metal stake skewered the two Mushi at once.

"Guh...!"

Not minding the white masks raising a voice of agony, Aya again raised her arm overhead.

The ground beetle raised its elytra and a large amount of gas came blowing

out of its rear. Its orange-colored feelers swayed.

"I warned you."

Heading towards the two skewered Mushi, Aya again waved her arm.

A crimson glow swallowed them. The large explosion burning the Mushi to a crisp kept going and even created a hole that seemed about three times bigger than Chiharu in the near wall.

Chiharu could do nothing but stand still.

Aya's Mushi could probably alter the composition of any substances it had eaten and eject them. She could attack with all kinds of stakes such as gas-state heat rays, masses of metal or super-compressed explosive flames. Even to Chiharu's eyes her ability seemed to be frighteningly powerful.

"Y-you... are you really *Gensis*...?"

Only one white mask remained. Raising a voice of fear, he turned around.

Aya stooped down her body like a predator beast hunting its prey, and without a moment's delay pursued the white mask.

"You don't have to chase him. Since it became this noisy the people downstairs are also sure to notice."

Aya stopped her movements hearing the voice echoing from the exit.

"Chami-chan?"

As Chiharu and Aya turned around, they could see a small girl standing there. Holding her still aching stomach, she looked at them with a rigid face.

"So you ended up coming, Chami. Did you worry?"

"Don't be stupid. I was just anxious to have you two alone, and my stomach hurt more than my wounds. C'mon, let's scam."

"Y-yeah."

Chiharu and Aya tried going past Chami to the surface.

Yet Chami didn't move from the spot.

"What's wrong, Chami?"

"Aya. You—"

Chami slowly approached Aya as she was turned around.

"I finally realized. What's happening to you is the same phenomenon as *Kanata*. Because of the ability I put inside you the balance of your mind and body is messed up. I can't explain your movements and your Mushi's sudden growth otherwise. My ability has effects even I still don't understand... I should've realized this during the time *Owl* gained non-catlike intellect."

Saying this, Chami tried raising her hand at Aya.

Yet the one to grab and stop her hand was none other than Aya herself.

"...What are you going to do?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm canceling my ability. No matter how strong you become, if you break up like *Kanata* it'll be meaningless. If you become useless then I don't need you."

"I'm fine like this. I feel great lately."

Chami glared at Aya as she said this calmly. Yet she didn't withdraw.

"Also, if you lift your ability I might stop listening to your orders. You need pawns, right Chami?"

"...You still obey me even while knowing about my ability. If I need you I'll come to get you again."

"Liar. You'll never come back. And if I'm removed from the fight you'll never think about me again."

"Idiot...! Even that feeling of 'loneliness' is amplified by my ability. But you know this!"

"Anyway, I'm fine as is. The one to bring me in was you, Chami. Throwing me away is against the rules."

Cutting off the conversation one-sidedly, Aya turned her back to Chami and started walking.

"...Tch, don't regret this later."

She asserted, and suddenly glared at Chiharu.

"Eh? W-what?"

"How did it go for you? There was some result, right?"

She said, and Chiharu hesitated to answer.

Mushibane's new development.

Anmoto Shiika's resolution.

Daisuke who was hated by Mushitsuki.

Now that Chiharu came to know various things, the conclusion inside her only grew further.

"I recalled the past a bit, but... I still don't know a lot about Daisuke."

Hearing Chiharu's half-baked answer, Chami diverted her gaze with a bored "hmph".

"As if you'd understand one Mushitsuki so easily. —Let's go."

She still required plenty to understand Daisuke as he was now.

To Whom It May Concern, how are you doing—

The "narrating habit" she grew accustomed to in the days without Daisuke, her brother whom she has forgotten, now surfaced in her heart.

It will take a little bit more time to find you. But on top of knowing how you are right now I'll definitely meet you— Looking at the two Mushitsuki girls walking in the front, Chiharu nodded.

"Right."

After five years she finally recalled the name of the person she had been addressing it to.

So wait for me, Daisuke—

Chiharu softly muttered in her heart.

1.04 Daisuke Part 2

*

Gaping open.

It was as if a hole was opened up.

The same feeling as if the very center of his heart fell off.

Since he had no center, he was able to stand the pain.

Since he had no center, he didn't want to do anything.

Since he had no center – he didn't have any sense of reality every day.

"..."

The voices of insects could be heard outside the class of Shiou Elementary School.

The voices of insects and giggles surrounded Daisuke holding his backpack.

Reflected in his eyes was the space opened up in the exact middle of the class.

As if reflecting his heart, that was the only missing thing in the scene.

—This morning, when Daisuke arrived at school, his desk was gone.

"Horrible... who did that? That's bullying."

"It's bullying, bullying."

His male classmates were laughing enjoyably in their seats by the window. It was the same group that always teased Daisuke. Only these comrades were laughing, and the other boys and girls pretended not to see anything.

"I wonder who did it... What do you say, Tsumura?"

"U-umm... Kusuriya-kun..."

Another boy from the same class, Tsumura Mitsuki, hesitatingly called to Daisuke. He hanged his head as if to shrink further his already small body.

"I... umm... sorr..."

Ignoring Mitsuki, Daisuke turned around in place. As he walked toward the entrance, his legs were caught up. Another laughter rose as the boys looked at Daisuke stumbling to the floor.

"..."

A dull pain ran through his knees. He apparently grazed them.

Yet Daisuke bit his lips as he stood up, grabbed his backpack and left the class. He kept going and passed through the corridor, climbing up the stairs.

Daisuke came to the school rooftop. Leaning against the wall next to the entrance, he sat down on the floor. Textbooks fell out of his dropped backpack, but he didn't even turn to look at those.

He didn't come to the roof to think.

He just didn't have any other place to go to.

Daisuke had no place he belonged to – anywhere.

"So stupid..."

He pouted and mumbled while hugging his knees. He didn't know if he was speaking about his classmate who hid his desk or about himself who just left the class without doing anything.

If he resisted even a little bit, perhaps they would stop teasing him.

But that was all.

The fact that Daisuke was all alone in the class wouldn't change. The facts that he was unsociable and that he had no father wouldn't change.

Thinking that, he didn't feel like resisting at all.

—Several hours later.

After Daisuke burned time by taking a nap and scribbling in his textbooks, the bell rang.

School was over.

Since he hadn't eaten lunch he was hungry. He estimated the time it would take the children to leave school and left the roof.

On the way he dropped by his classroom.

Apparently everyone had gone home. The vacant space in the center of the empty classroom was filled.

"..."

Perhaps someone brought it back or perhaps their homeroom teacher scolded the students and made them return it, but anyway Daisuke's desk returned to its previous spot. He left the classroom.

He replaced his shoes at the shoe rack, leaving the school building.

When he did he heard some voices speaking from nearby.

"You're a traitor, Tsumura!"

"B...But..."

"I don't even want to hear it, you stinking traitor!"

Tsumura Mitsuki was surrounded by his classmates, hit in his stomach and cowered.

What, is he getting bullied as well—

Daisuke ignored it and tried heading toward the main gate.

"Why did you return Kusuriya's desk!"

Daisuke stopped in place.

For the first time, what welled up inside him—

"..."

Was anger.

It was fine if Tsumura Mitsuki was ordered to hide Daisuke's desk against his will, but he probably couldn't bear it and returned it. Either way if he was bullied he wouldn't help him.

But Daisuke hated that what caused them to persecute Mitsuki was himself.

He could ignore everything that was done to him, but – having another person's peaceful life be destroyed because of him made him feel bad.

"...Stop that."

Daisuke said, heading towards the group of boys.

"Hey, it's Kusuriya."

"What, were you still in school?"

"Come here. Let's play with both of them."

One of them approached Daisuke and tried pulling his arm.

"..."

Daisuke shook it off.

"Ouch! What the heck? Do you want to go at it?"

He thrust him away.

"..."

"Wow..."

He pushed him back.

The boys looked at Daisuke with surprised faces. But their faces distorted more and more with anger.

—Later, even he wasn't sure how he faced his opponents.

Daisuke was just used to being beaten, and didn't have much of the feeling known as fear. But it appeared like his opponents weren't so.

When he returned one blow, the other party immediately held his head and cowered. As he did the other boys also grew scared of Daisuke and didn't want to come close to him. He could remember that at the point two of them started crying the others immediately ran away. Yet their wounds were much lighter than Daisuke's and one boy was also unhurt.

"...Ouch..."

No matter how used he was to it, pain still hurt. He wiped off his nosebleed roughly with his sleeve, picking up the dropped backpack. He wanted to leave just like that but Mitsuki hurriedly rushed to him.

"A-are you fine, Kusuriya-kun?"

"..."

"Umm... T-thank you!"

"I didn't really—"

"You're so strong! Why didn't you do anything until now?"

Mitsuki stubbornly clung to Daisuke ever since they exited the school premises. The entire time on their way back he directed a gaze full of respect toward him. Daisuke felt creeped out and couldn't return his gaze.

"How nice that you're strong... Since I'm a weakling I'll get bullied again..."

Mitsuki hanged his head while saying this and Daisuke spoke to him bluntly.

"If they try doing anything to you then I'll do something. They only got carried away because I wasn't doing anything..."

"Really?"

Being faced with a truly happy-looking smile, Daisuke could only mutter "uh".

Daisuke didn't feel like trying to save him but rather some sense of responsibility. But apparently Mitsuki didn't think that way. He made the mistake of thinking he was a nice person.

Separating from Mitsuki, Daisuke tried climbing up the stairs to his apartment.

Suddenly feeling he was being watched, he turned around to the road.

"...?"

It was his imagination.

As Daisuke turned to look behind he could see a granular object reflecting the setting sun's light.

It was a scale glowing in purple.

Tilting his head, Daisuke climbed up the stairs.

He heard a voice. "Falling behind on rent... until after the 10th..." and it kept going.

When he reached the end of the stairs there was a middle-aged woman in front of his house. She was familiar to him. She was supposed to be the apartment's landlady.

Meanwhile, Daisuke's mother was lowering her head in the entryway. She was recently always busy with her job and seemed to become increasingly fragile.

Noticing his presence, the landlady left some words to his mother and departed.

"I'm home."

"Welcome back."

Daisuke's mother leaked a tired sigh and entered the house. She was brooding and didn't even look at his face. She apparently hadn't even noticed he was injured.

"..."

Daisuke also entered and closed the door.

It was a cramped apartment that only had a living room and bedrooms. That was the house his mother, his sister, as well as Daisuke himself lived in.

—He didn't like that house much.

Even before it was cramped, his mother always seemed pained whenever she was home. Probably tired, she would only sigh and seldom ever looked at Daisuke's face. There were also times when he spoke up to her and she was so absent-minded she didn't hear him.

Nothing changed regardless if Daisuke was there or not. That was the same as in school. No, if the cause for his mother's sighs was also him, then— When he was at home he ended up with a lot of unnecessary thoughts.

Daisuke hated that.

"I'm hooome! Ah! Daisuke, you're back!"

As he put his backpack in the bedroom, a voice called to him from the door.

"Jeez! I thought of going back with you, but you weren't anywhere – kyaaa!"

Opening the sliding screen and flying into the bedroom, the girl raised a scream as if the world ended.

—Daisuke's sister, Chiharu, was an idiot.

She would clamor exaggeratedly at every little thing. Just like a protagonist acting on the stage.

She was bright and carefree to the extent he doubted if they were really related by blood.

"Daisuke, y-you're injured! Come here! Your sister will disinfect you!"

"It's fine, it doesn't hurt anymore. Stop it."

"Please be quiet. You'll bother our neighbors." Their mother called towards the scuffling kids while in front of the sink.

"Why are you hurt? Who did this? ...It couldn't be El – some kind of mature woman or...?"

"Hah? No, umm... I fell."

"Really? What if – no! Daisuke's a strong kid!"

"...Who are you saying this to, stupid."

"Ah, no, umm, just talking to myself. I just wanted to shout a bit. It's just that, really."

While putting band-aids on Daisuke's cheeks, Chiharu desperately denied.

His sister was acting a bit strange recently.

She started tagging along with Daisuke more than the usual and at times she'd act as if she was talking to someone when alone. It seemed that she herself hasn't noticed it, but it was her habit to say "it's just that, really" when she was lying.

"Also, you can't call your big sister stupid. —I'll go back with you starting

tomorrow so it'll be fine. C'mon, don't do that anymore."

"I told you I just fell. So annoying!"

"I'm not annoying! It's normal!"



Chiharu seemed to be eager to meddle in Daisuke's business.

For him it was more unbearable than anything else. It was obviously also embarrassing.

"It's not normal at all."

Chiharu was probably the one and only being in the world around Daisuke right now.

—A person who needed him when he had no one else.

Chiharu was very kind towards him, probably out of her duty as an older sister to protect her brother.

She was too kind.

Chiharu didn't play with her friends – because she recently became excessively worried about Daisuke.

By prioritizing Daisuke over everything else, the world around Chiharu isolated her.

She detached herself little by little from the place she belonged to for his sake.

And she herself hasn't noticed that.

"Don't follow me on the way to school or back from it anymore."

Daisuke said coldly, causing Chiharu to make a lonely face. It made his chest prickle, but he didn't let it show on his face.

—Daisuke's sister, Chiharu, was stupid.

Since she was stupid, she needed to find another place.

Daisuke shouldn't be there, he thought.

*

These were memories from five years ago.

The memories from before Daisuke became all alone and left that cheap apartment.

"Uh—"

He was in the backstreet of a town he didn't know the name of.

Sleeping in the corner of the empty alley, Kusuriya Daisuke opened his eyelids. He removed the SEPB's coat he had used to stave off the cold and stood up.

He intended on a nap but at he apparently ended up actually falling asleep at some point.

"I slept too much... shit."

He clicked his tongue, wearing his coat again. Confirming there was no one nearby, he started running.

But his legs kicking the ground suddenly lost their strength. Apparently his fatigue was not gone with just a little sleep.

—Ever since learning of Chiharu's disappearance at 'URBAN', Daisuke kept running toward a certain place.

He had no idea how many dozens of kilometers he had run. This nap was his first time to sleep ever since the day before yesterday when he had arrived at Nishito City and until now. His joints raised screams and he also accumulated quite a lot of fatigue.

Where was Daisuke heading to?

Except for him none knew the answer.

"Kh—"

Once again exerting power in his knees he stood up.

He had crushed the goggles that had the function to inform the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau of his location by his own hands.

It shouldn't be easy to grasp Daisuke's whereabouts. As to not be caught by the SEPB's search network that thoroughly encompassed the whole country, he chose to not rely on any public transit and to keep running through empty roads.

He couldn't allow himself to be discovered by the Central Headquarters as they would consider him an obstacle and obstruct him.

He couldn't involve the East Central Branch he belonged to either.

That's why he decided on his own accord to cut all contact with the SEPB.

"If I don't hurry, she'll get there first..."

Clenching his teeth, Daisuke raised his face. He started running again.

—Dreaming of the past was no coincidence.

He knew that his older sister, Chiharu, had gone missing.

That was why Daisuke had to hurry.

He didn't know where Chiharu was now and what she was doing.

But, because of that—

He had no time.

Although he knew that only the worst situation possible might be waiting for him there, Daisuke had to go.

"I have to somehow get there before..."

Would he be able to accomplish his objective all by himself?

—Such thoughts crossed his mind.

Daisuke knew the true identity of the despair waiting for him in the place he was headed to. He was the only one to know it.

If he could borrow the power of the East Central Branch— "No..."

He threw away these naïve thoughts.

The current East Central Branch *wouldn't be enough*. He was the only one to know that, too.

"I'm fine alone. This time I will definitely—"

Until now he always fought on his own.

And he would keep fighting alone.

"This time...!"

The Cleridae insect landed on his body.

Without minding his own exhaustion...

Not even caring the waste of his dream...

Fusing with his Mushi, Daisuke ran on the ground heading to a certain direction.

1.05 The Others

The curtains of a hospital room fluttered by a gentle breeze.

Goroumaru Touko rose from the chair used by visitors to close the open window.

Although it has become warm, the wind was still cold. Even the fresh outside air would become poison for the person lying on the bed were it to be in contact with him too much.

Closing the window, the noise from outside ceased all at once. The personal sickroom now became a secluded space for only Touko and the person on the bed alone.

"As expected it's a bit cold this time of the year. I hope Daisuke-san's not freezing now, tahaha."

She showed a loose smile at the youth lying on the bed.

There was naturally no reply. Touko smiled wryly and sat on the chair again. Her unkempt hair lightly shook. She fixed the position of her glasses using her index finger.

"Ah, you also look cold, Haji-senpai. S-sorry for not noticing..."

Seeing the blanket was off, she hurriedly rose. After fixing it she took a breath as if completing hard work.

With his chest silently going up and down on the bed was Haji Keigo. He was the youth who served as the SEPB's East Central Branch Director. Since he was asleep there were no traces of his trademark sharp eyes and faint smile. The lines of his face became thin because he has lost a lot of weight.

Ever since the climactic battle against Mushibane in Hashiba City during last year's Christmas he remained unconscious. Every day his little sister Senri would

come to visit and nurse him, yet there were no signs of him waking up until now.

"Ah, Senri-san? She has training today. But since it should be over soon I believe she will then come here. —Ah, no, I didn't force her. She also wishes to battle... so, umm... we ended up adding your little sister to the fighting, please don't be mad."

Despite Haji making no movements at all, Touko explained this with added gestures.

Since she shared the same blood as Haji, Senri was especially smart. Although she bore the handicap of being blind since birth, her growth through the training was astonishing.

"Also, umm... I still haven't told her. That Daisuke-san cut all contact..."

She unconsciously lowered her eyes. She looked at her hands crossed on her knees.

"And we still haven't been able to find the location of his sister – Chiharu-san."

They have lost contact with Daisuke visiting Nishito City right after Touko herself informed him of Chiharu's disappearance.

Daisuke's goggles were discovered on the rooftop of the building known as Urban Tower. The remains of his cellphone were found in the same place. She was also worried about him due to finding traces of a battle, but there were eyewitness reports about a boy similar to Daisuke that appeared to be fine running away from the tower.

Letting the local people see him probably meant he left the area in a great hurry. They also confirmed the fact that the goggles had been destroyed by his own gun.

Meaning Daisuke disappeared to avoid the SEPB out of his own accord.

Did he have any idea about the location of his sister Chiharu?

Perhaps.

But perhaps not.

The only thing they knew was that Daisuke ignored the organization known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau and moved.

It wasn't just Central Headquarters.

He had left behind even his supposed allies of the East Central Branch at 'URBAN' along with the goggles.

—Even if I'm gone from the East Central Branch, don't lose against Central Headquarters.

These were the last words Daisuke said on the phone.

Did he understand their meaning?

If his intent was certain, then Touko had to reach a certain decision as the commander of the East Central Branch— "R...really, what is he thinking about! It's surely his rebellious phase! How could he disappear without saying anything and make us worry like that! When he comes back I'll firmly scold him! It's revenge for always being scolded – no, as an adult human, I should get angry when the time calls for it!"

Haji remained with a calm expression and closed eyes, saying nothing.

He was skilled enough to raise the boy known as Kusuriya Daisuke into the strongest Mushitsuki *Kakkou*, and he could even compete equally against the Central Headquarters despite him being only 28 years old. He had risked his life to save Daisuke, so while he was said to be cold-hearted he also possessed unshakable intelligence and strength.

Meanwhile, the Acting Branch Director of the East Central Branch, Touko, was...

—Incompetent.

Her evaluation could be summed up with that word. Since she herself acknowledged it, she was beyond help.

Yet Haji chose none other than the incompetent Touko as his successor— "In the first place, even if Daisuke's gone for a bit the East Central Branch won't give up! With my skills we got the Blaze Class Rank 2 Akatsuki-san as a comrade, and I even upturned the Central Headquarters' priority-based chain of

command! If I hadn't done so then Daisuke wouldn't have received permission to battle when he went to Nishito City—"

Puffing her chest, she smiled. Yet both hands grabbed the bed's sheets tightly. She intended on doing her best even while being incompetent.

She had sworn so during the time she used Anmoto Shiika – the girl known as *Fuyuhotaru* as a bargaining chip against Central Headquarters. And she had the resolution to fight.

She wanted to save the people fighting and hurting each other because of the unreasonable beings known as Mushi.

"So you don't have to worry one bit! The East Central Branch is fine! Yes, we're fine! Definitely fine! Fine..."

With the trust she had received from Haji...

And as long as Daisuke, who hadn't lost even once no matter his enemy, was there...

Even the incompetent Touko thought she would be able to do it.

However—

"It's fine... I will... somehow..."

Her voice shook. Slowly lowering her gaze, the white floor reflected in her eyes.

"I..."

Blaze Class Rank 1 member, *Kakkou*.

Touko currently lost that strongest card.

"...If it wasn't me but Haji-senpai, he probably wouldn't have even disappeared..."

She muttered these words unconsciously. But she suddenly raised her head.

"I-it's nothing. That doesn't count, doesn't count! Yeah, I'll do it! Who cares about Mushi! Who cares about Mushibane! Who cares about Central Headquarters! But I'll be glad if Vice-Director Miguruma, Harukiyo and the

Annihilation Unit go easy on us a bit... A-anyway I'll do my best! Please watch me, Haji-senp- Ouch! My shin... my shin... the edge of the bed...!"

Bracing herself and trying to get up, Touko hit her leg on the bed and squatted.

While Touko was curled up on the floor—

She felt as if she could hear a familiar laughter.

A terribly cynical, faint laugh.

"__"

With her body still curled, Touko widened her eyes.

It was nothing more than an auditory illusion produced by her weak heart. —
So she thought.

She was scared of confirming it so she couldn't raise her face.

—Enough being high-spirited. You have the habit to be wasting your efforts the more you are enthusiastic.

The cynical tone of Haji, unchanged from when he was her private tutor during her college days, was reborn in her ears.

—Look at this report card. You're a genius. Although you've taught me the meaning of the word despair for the first time since I was born, this actually makes me want to pay for your tuition.

Such was her extremely sarcastic and ill-natured private tutor.

Yet in some respects it was enjoyable, and Touko didn't dislike being under his command. Perhaps that was why she thought of trying to be unlike her enthusiastic self from that time a bit.

"__"

She felt like she could do better on that test she had enthusiastically studied for.

She simply thought of something.

—If her results were good, then she wouldn't have a need for a private tutor

anymore.

In the end her feeling she could solve the problems was apparently her misunderstanding. Starting then, she wasn't able to focus on her studies so her results grew increasingly worse.

Yet, for some reason only when she tried the entrance examination for the same university as Haji she worked hard again.

As a result, Touko had miraculously passed the exams—

"Haji—senpai—"

In order to ascertain the faint laugh she heard was only an illusion...

Touko slowly raised her head.

—The wind outside the window grew increasingly stronger.

Was it already one hour since she had closed the window? Leaves flying at the transparent glass raised a small sound.

The gentle breeze turned into a strong wind.

The outside scenery visible from inside the sickroom was dyed by orange.

It was already sunset.

"—Ah, right. Come in."

Sitting in the chair and peeling an apple, Touko turned toward the door.

The person who knocked opened it.

It was Ogata Akatsuki and Haji Senri. Akatsuki gently held the blind Senri's hand.

"Acting Branch Director, umm... huh?"

Seeing the apple Touko was holding, Akatsuki was startled.

"That apple... no way, has the Branch Director—"

"T-this is a misunderstanding, Akatsuki-san!"

Flustered, Touko rose from the chair. She frantically explained while swinging around the apple and knife.

"It's not like I wanted to steal his food...! You see, umm, right right, I thought that it was about time for Senri-san and you to show up! How about trying one? It's sweet and delicious! —No! I don't really know if it's sweet, umm..."

"..."

Akatsuki looked more amazed the more she looked at him.

Next to the flustered Touko, Haji Keigo kept sleeping with a pale face without any change. Confirming this fact, the boy dropped his shoulders and sighed.

"I won't really spread rumors or anything, so please stop swinging the knife... Wait, aren't your eyes a bit red?"

"Tahaha, I hit my shin on the bed and it's really swollen... even I would like to cry. Oh, right, I should create a personal relief squad for our Branch—"

"Are you fine, Touko-san?"

Haji Senri wore a worried face. She was sensitive to changes in other people more than anyone.

"Your voice is a bit different than normal. Was that it really that painful or..."

"You don't have to be so serious, Senri. This person is always like this after all. —More importantly, Acting Branch Director. I have something to talk with you about. Do you have a minute?"

"Ah, yes. —Uh... The more Senri-san is kind the more conspicuous Akatsuki-san's coldness becomes..."

Akatsuki, who was once a member of Mushibane, hated the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. If his friend Senri wasn't there then he would've actually wanted to get out of there immediately.

Touko gave up the apple and returned it to the shelf. Noticing that Senri was looking at the bed, she followed her sight.

"...Leave this to me, Haji-senpai."

She said at the youth that had his eyes closed.

"Eh? Did you say something?"

"Ah, no! Just talking to myself, Senri-san."

While showing a forced smile and exiting the sickroom, she could see familiar faces lined up in the corridor.

The boy wearing the same uniform as Akatsuki was the member known by the codename *Kabuto*. His battle capabilities were not that high, but his mission success rate was outstanding. A subordinate like him that would successfully carry out any kind of mission was an extremely important human resource.

Another one was a girl who looked like an adult. She was Shirakashi Ubuki who got released from hospital just the other day. The turban wrapped around her head was used to prevent her hair from obstructing her vision when she used her special ability of flying. She was a Fusion Type Mushitsuki just like Daisuke.

"Huh? Weren't you all supposed to be on your normal duties... or rather, on standby? Oh I see, you came to visit Haji-senpai."

"Touko-san. Is it true that Dai-kun is missing...?"

As Touko tilted her head, Senri said this with an anxious tone.

"Eh...? How do you—"

"Seems like it's true."

Leaning on the wall and crossing his arms, *Kabuto* sighed. He seemed annoyed.

"Ehehe. I made friends with *Maimai*-tan and heard 'bout it from her. She said that the intelligence division is looking for him but still haven't found him."

The one with the special way of speaking was Ubuki.

"Hah, being friends with her is quite unusual – wait, ehh? W-what, isn't that a huge breach of the rules? No, more importantly, Ubuki-san, you still tentatively belong to Central Headquarters, and you're still recovering, so you shouldn't move around too much."

"He apparently disappeared the day before yesterday. Why did none of us receive orders to look for him?"

The gazes of the four teens glared at Touko.

They all probably had their own thoughts. But she kept silent.

"From the situation it appears that *Kakkou* cut contact with the SEPB out of his own accord. —And I've seen such cases countless times until now."

Kabuto said in a rigid tone.

"That's the pattern when members run away or betray us."

"..."

Touko was still silent. She calmly received the gazes of her subordinates.

The first to respond to *Kabuto*'s words was Senri.

"There's no way Dai-kun betrayed us, right?"

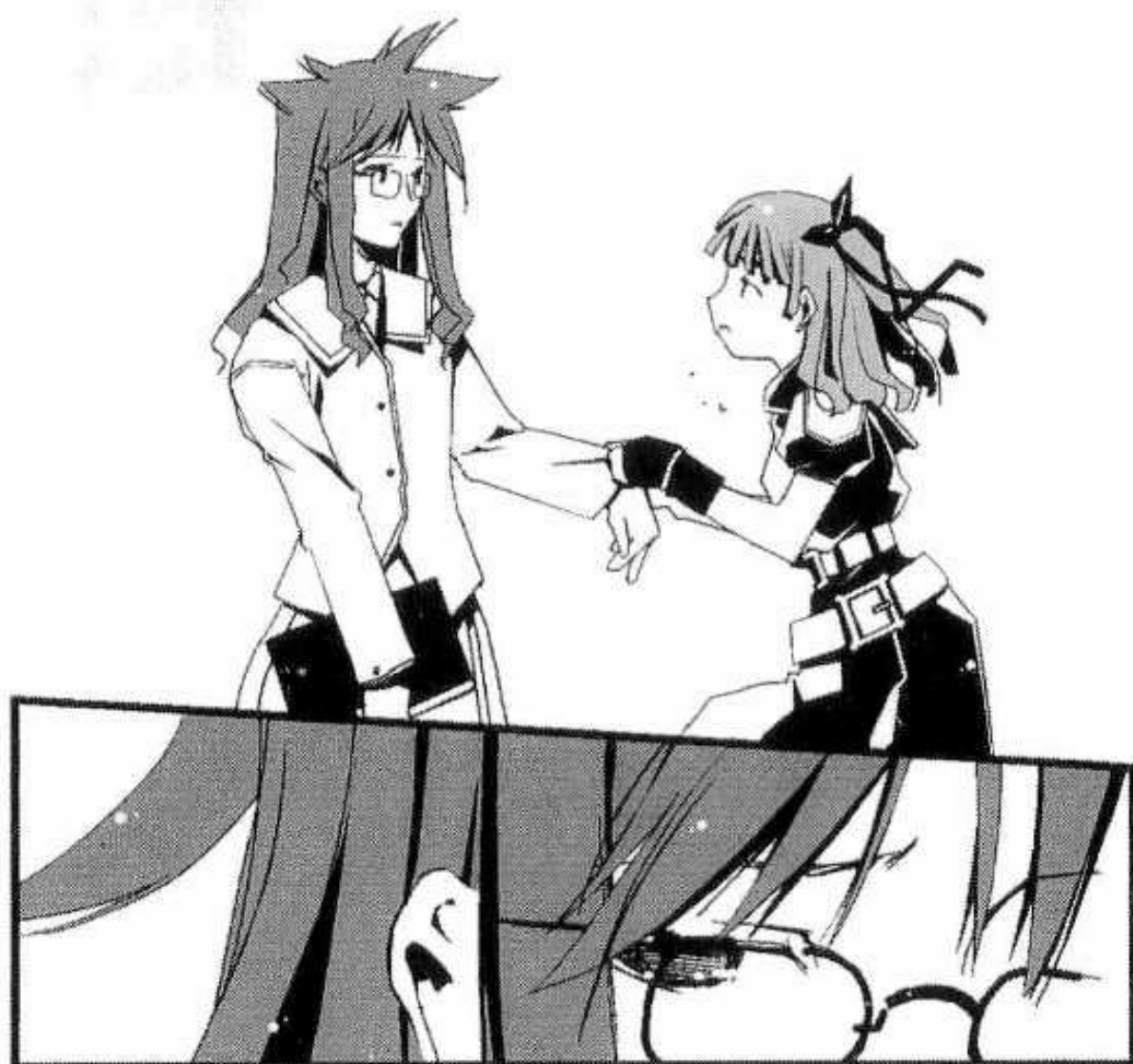
She detached from Akatsuki, grabbing Touko's clothes.

"Why do you not get us to search for him quickly? Isn't Dai-kun targeted by a lot of people? He might be in danger right now...!"

"Well... perhaps."

Senri became speechless at her words.

"I hadn't given you any searching orders because it's impossible. Out of all the kinds of missions I can't appoint you four to look for a person."



"What do you mean?"

"Akatsuki-san. You are the person I can't allow to go out on this search mission the most. The information that *Kakkou*-san's gone might have been leaked to Mushibane. If that happens there's a possibility the East Central Branch will be targeted again. Just like their members attacked us before. In the first place you were invited to serve as *Kakkou*-san's replacement as a powerful member at hand in case of his absence."

Akatsuki calmly glared at Touko. Perhaps he had seen through her intentions. Touko's reasons were actually half lie.

The boy known as Ogata Akatsuki harbored murderous hatred toward Daisuke as *Kakkou*. If he was sent to search for him, got caught up by his own feelings and took independent actions, there was no doubt it would turn into a battle. She wanted to avoid the worst-case scenario of allies fighting each other until they confirmed all facts.

Instead of Akatsuki Shirakashi Ubuki raised her hand.

"Then I'll be goin'!"

"Although your mobility is great, Ubuki-san, you're powerless when it comes to searching. As long as you don't have any enemy-searching special ability like *Konoha*-san, looking for a single person from the sky would be difficult."

"If it's an 'enemy-searching' ability you need – I have finished my training today."

Hearing Senri's earnest words, Touko was speechless.

She thought of her as excellent, but her growth was way beyond her estimations. Wondering if it was really alright to allow her to train, even now she felt doubts.

Haji-senpai, Senri-san might become someone indispensable to our battle— "... Unfortunately, Senri-san has no mobility. Also, in the unlikely case it becomes a fight you also don't have a way to protect yourself. And this lack of fighting power would remain the same even if you add Ubuki-san to the team."

"...!"

Ubuki grimaced in vexation. In contrast to the other Fusion-types who possessed strong battle capabilities, she had no way to fight. Touko also knew that she had a complex about her fighting abilities.

Naming himself instead was *Kabuto*.

"Then you can just add me."

"I know this will anger you but... pairing you with Senri-san is very half-baked. It leaves a lot to be desired in mobility and fighting ability. Since there are many enemies targeting Kakkou it will turn into quite the dangerous mission. If you are unable to find him and even end up getting taken out... it would be the worst situation."

With just this much, a mission like this could be left for Daisuke to handle alone. Since it was him, he had searching abilities including mobility and information gathering, as well as obviously possessed fighting strength of the highest grade.

The problem was that Daisuke was the one to conceal himself.

And that wasn't even the worst part.

Daisuke withdrew from the East Central Branch out of his own volition. His actions would be regarded as violation of the biggest rule breaching of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

It was just like *Kabuto* said.

Even without knowing Daisuke's true intentions, the acts committed by him were in fact— Running away from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

Although she was a temporary commander of the organization, Touko had to issue orders.

"We lack the manpower to search for *Kakkou*-san. I asked Branch Director Assistant Ishimaki to leave for the Central Headquarters."

Touko asserted with a serious expression in front of her subordinates knitting their brows dubiously.

"So all of you please stay on standby so that you could move at any time. The

moment we find *Kakkou* we will need your powers."

Haji-senpai—

She spoke to Haji Keigo in her heart.

I'm doing what I should—

"Since *Kakkou*-san's actions went against the regulations of the East Central Branch, I have no choice but to consider it a betrayal. So as soon as we locate him—"

Touko gave orders as the Acting Branch Director.

"We will use the full efforts of the East Central Branch to capture Blaze Class Rank 1 member *Kakkou*."

2.00 Chiharu Part 4

•

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Even if Chiharu didn't do anything.

Even if she had to do something.

She thought these peaceful days would always continue.

Forever.

Even after she became an adult—

"Come on, Chiharu. Let's eat your brother's dream today. I'm hungry."

The instant the short homeroom class was over, the voice of Aria Vareï rose inside Chiharu's head.

The teacher on the podium was giving messages to the class.

Chiharu was completely absentminded and inattentive.

"Your appetite is at its limits already."

Aria complained.

"Also, Chiharu, ever since you've met Elviolene all you've been doing is thinking... I can understand why even you would be afraid of that, but talk to me more..."

While Chiharu gazed outside the window, Aria Vareï spoke to her from inside.

That person is... also like Aria—

Although she couldn't see her, she could feel it on her skin.

The woman wearing a crimson long coat and sunglasses, Elviolene. She also existed nearby right now.

"Not quite like me. We're both beings that are drawn by delicious dreams. We both eat humans' dreams and give birth to Mushitsuki. But what's different is the category of the Mushitsuki we produce."

The Original Three—

"Ooh, you've done well to remember that name even though I only talked about it briefly. Impressive! We're lured by first-rate dreams, so we end up bumping into each other from time to time. Just like this time. Still, it doesn't mean we're enemies because of that; we have our own rule. First come, first served."

First come, first served—

"You know, despite her always eating a lot, El is actually strangely fussy over taste. She waits for the dream's flavor to become of the highest grade before eating it. She's also called *Oogui*, meaning gluttonous. I'm personally picky as I value quality over quantity or flavor. So I pick dreams fitting my taste. On the other hand, Diorestoi has a strange taste and likes delicacies, so he purposely distorts dreams before eating them."

You all create Mushitsuki—

"Yeah. Actually that's our only common feature. I already have no personality, Dio has a half-baked personality remaining, and El's already formed her own. Our personalities are different but our nature is the same. Just like moths drawn to a flame. Such is our habit. We appear when lured by dream. Oh, but our abilities are also completely different."

Abilities—

"Yeah yeah, because I'm a pacifist. I barely have any abilities to fight. Because of that it's ironic that Fusion-Type Mushitsuki end up super strong. I wonder if that's because that, as long as there's not some great irregular, I fall asleep again after eating someone's dream."

So I don't have any ability to fight—

"Leaving me aside, Dio is moderately strong. But that woman, El, is absurdly strong. Not only is she strong but there's a reason she can't be destroyed. I can affirm it, no one who can destroy El currently exists in the world. —And now you'll finally want to hear about all the juicy details! Also, going with the flow, why don't you also try asking me about the reason for our birth?"

"No, I don't want to ask about that."

Chiharu let out a voice and cleanly refused.

Thanks to it coincidentally overlapping with the bells indicating the end of the school day, no one heard her voice.

"Mushi, Mushitsuki... the Original Three and all that have nothing to do with us."

She muttered in a small voice, held her backpack and left the class. Her friends tried calling to her, but since she hurried Chiharu ignored them.

"Nothing to do with us... That's a problematic statement! What about me inside of you? How horrible, that's violation of my human rights! I'll sue you!"

Turning a deaf ear to Aria's protests, Chiharu rushed down the stairs.

She waited in front of the lower grade classroom for her brother to come out.

Daisuke immediately appeared.

"...Geh."

Seeing Chiharu's face, her brother frowned. She became shocked.

"What's that reaction! Your sister is shocked!"

"S-shut up! Don't come in front of my classroom and be so loud! Isn't it embarrassing!"

"It's not embarrassing! It's normal!"

"Don't come with me, stupid Chiharu!"

As Daisuke walked down the corridor with a fast pace, Chiharu followed him from behind.

She knew he was being bullied by his classmates. And since Daisuke was kind

he wouldn't strike back.

That's why Chiharu had to protect him as his sister —

"I think you're a bit overprotective though."

"I'm not overprotective. It's normal—"

She looked at Daisuke going down the stairs.

A sweet fragrance drifted from her brother walking in front of her.

It wasn't that she was hungry or that her throat was dry. But the rich smell rising from him lured her as if it contained essential nutrition for her.

Daisuke was going down the stairs.

Chiharu was assaulted by an urge to leap down, slip through the passersby with Aria Vareï's ability and swoop down from behind.

"...Dai...suke—"

Chiharu's hair rippled.

Just by imagining herself stuffing her cheeks with his incredibly delicious dream, a smile rose to her mouth— "S-sorry!"

Someone bumped into her shoulders from behind and she came to her senses.

"Ah! What a waste! Why did you ruin everything when she only needed a little push!"

The one who bumped into Chiharu was a meek-seeming boy. He apologized to her and then started running again.

Calming down, Chiharu covered her pale face with both hands. She breathed heavily.

It was a close call.

Just a bit more and Chiharu would've lose to her urges as Aria Vareï.

"I have to pull myself together... I'm Daisuke's sister after all..."

As Chiharu mumbled to herself, the boy from just now called toward Daisuke.

"Daisuke-kun! Why did you leave before me? Let's go home together!"

"Ah, oh, right. Sorry, Mitsuki."

"Please tell me how to become stronger today! I saw it on TV the other day! They said that to become strong you need a righteous heart and compassion!"

"Ahaha, was that Carnivorous Squadron? Are you watching that?"

Chiharu widened her eyes.

Without thinking she stood in place.

Daisuke let out a voice – of laughter.

When was the last time she had seen her brother smile enjoyably?

"You don't have to hold back so much, right?"

Aria's voice was gentle. Although a self-proclaimed wicked being, Aria spoke in a tone as if unwilling to see Chiharu suffer.

"Even if you weren't there your brother will be fine."

He was fine even without Chiharu.

Meaning, he would be fine even if she forgot about him.

But, Chiharu was—

"...Ehehe."

Laughing, she followed after Daisuke. Switching her shoes, she walked slightly behind Daisuke and Mitsuki.

"Today's a day to remember. Daisuke's made a friend."

Daisuke's profile as he talked with his friend seemed happy.

Although Chiharu was once again assaulted by her 'appetite', she suppressed it with utmost effort.

She stepped back as to not disturb the good mood of her brother and his friend.

Aria spoke in a shaky voice to her.

"What's up with you—"

It was a low voice that she had never heard before. It was as if Aria couldn't bear it anymore and so shouted.

"What's up with you! Why don't you hate me? I'm the one who selfishly entered you! Why don't you hate your brother? I only planted myself inside you because you're close to him! And yet you're the only one holding yourself back! You've lost your friends for your brother's sake and he's the only one to make friends and laugh! How can you care about us! You should make everything our fault and give up!"

Aria's jeers could be heard only by Chiharu. Except for that voice the road back home was quiet.

"I won't let you turn Daisuke into a Mushitsuki. I'll never let you do such a thing."

Chiharu smiled.

"I love him. I love him so much that he hates it. —I'm his sister after all."

"...!"

Aria was apparently unable to speak due to excessive anger. Chiharu understood that anguish.

Entering the residential area downhill from the school, there were increasingly less and less people around.

Elementary school ended early. Even at the best of times there was a declining population, so now the only ones to pass walking through the main street were Daisuke, his friend and Chiharu.

"Also, I... don't want to forget Daisuke."

Chiharu said in a mutter.

"The time you've spent with me will become nothing more than an illusion to you. You were simply involved in my long-lasting sleep. When I eat his dream and nourish myself I'll return being a cocoon..."

"I'll forget even about turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki, right? I hate just that."

She would rob her brother of his peaceful daily life and end up forgetting all about it.

She didn't want to imagine that future.

Although a sister needed to protect her brother, she would push him down to hell and only she would return to her peaceful life.

For Chiharu that was much scarier than death.

"That's too horrible. Not something a sister would do..."

"He'll turn into a Mushitsuki either way. —If you don't eat his dream... El will. First, until now I never failed in eating a dream that lured me. You won't be able to withstand your appetite forever."

"Daisuke will turn into a Mushitsuki either way?"

"Right. If you don't eat his dream El will. That's why I'm inside you, and El was also lured to him."

"...No."

Chiharu smiled.

She stopped her legs in a corner of the residential area.

A bit farther than Daisuke and his friend.

And—

From her back—

"Daisuke-chan's dream sure is getting steadily more delicious..."

A purple scale fell on the ground.

"Will you still not eat it, Aria? You seem to be having quite a lot of trouble this time."

Chiharu could realize even without turning around. Even without any reply, she knew who was behind her.

"I will never hate you, Aria."

Smiling, she turned to her back.

Standing there was a woman with rainbow-colored eyes and a crimson long coat.

One of the Original Three, Elviolene.

"N-no way... You're kidding, right Chiharu...?"

Aria's voice shook.

Chiharu's hair was instantly dyed blue.

Transforming into one of the Original Three, Aria Vareii, Chiharu grinned.

"Aria's inside me so I can protect Daisuke."

"What does this mean, Aria?"

"No, umm, wait a minute! This is a misunderstanding! C-Chiharu! Chiharu-san! Did you listen to me before? Me and El are of a completely different level —"

Ignoring Aria's panic, Chiharu glared at Elviolene.

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Chiharu and Daisuke's peaceful days – would definitely never change.

"I will beat this person and won't eat Daisuke's dream. If I do so... Daisuke won't turn into a Mushitsuki and I won't forget about him!"

"Kyaaa!"

While hearing Aria's shout, Chiharu leap at Elviolene.

The sunglasses woman narrowed her rainbow-colored eyes.

"*Fufu*—"

Purple-colored scales burst.

The scales assembled and created the legs and a horn of a large insect. The horn stabbed into the road, lifting up concrete.

The mass of concrete, weighing who knows how many tons, bent over Chiharu.

Chiharu's blue hair shone. Starting from her head, she plunged her body into the concrete.

Piercing through with her fusion abilities, she swung her right arm toward Elviolene.

"Wait a minute—"

The space Chiharu passed through warped. The blue glow made the ground explode and gouged a part of the nearby telegraph pole, assaulting Elviolene.

"How can you use that power! I didn't teach you about it!"

Elviolene moved to the side to evade.

"...!"

Changing her target, Chiharu also tried swinging her left arm.

"Stop that! That power... If you make even a single mistake you'll blow up your body!"

"—I'm not afraid of that at all."

Purple scales surrounded the smiling Elviolene. She disappeared as if the air swallowed her.

Chiharu hurriedly looked around her—

"Really, Aria?"

She heard a woman's voice from behind.

As Chiharu tried turning around she was hit by an impact on the nape of her neck.

Her consciousness was rapidly dimming.

"Disciplining this child is your job. We're not as close as me always forgiving you, right?"

"I-I know that, El..."

"*Fufu*. I also found the perfect aperitif. If you don't do it quickly, I might win this time, you know?"

"An aperitif...?"

While hearing the other two talking—

Chiharu lost her consciousness.

•

It was the next day after the infiltration to Mushibane's assembly.

Intermittent vibrations shook Chiharu's seat.

There were few passengers of the rapid-transit train during daytime in the middle of the week. Especially on the car and the very end where Chiharu and the rest sat in. There were only several other passengers on the same car.

Buildings in construction stuck out from the townscape flowing outside the window.

Chiharu wasn't well-informed in the geography outside Nishito City, but according to Chami the area was apparently designated as a special ward for the development plan of the country.

The patches of town she could see through the triangular glasses seemed to be brimming with liveliness, different from Nishito City that was on the countryside. Even the rapid-transit train Chiharu boarded on would probably have more passengers once they reach the town center.

"Don't look so comfortable and hum like that. And don't raise your face too much."

Chami, sitting next to Chiharu while crossing her arms, said in a resigned tone. As she wore Chiharu's cap low on her head she should look like a boy when seen from afar.

"Eh? Was I humming?"

Chiharu asked back, causing Chami to slightly shake her head as if saying she had enough.

"Never mind a small fry member like me, you're now a number one wanted criminal. I found out through *Konoha* that even Central Headquarters

discovered your identity. ...Really, I thought it would take them longer to find out you're Daisuke's older sister, but thanks to that we had to hasten our movements."

"Do they really think I'm that dangerous?"

Chami replied to Chiharu's innocent question by wrinkling her brows.

"You probably don't know this, but there was a precedent for someone close to a Fusion Type Mushitsuki gaining incredible strength. Even leaving that aside, they probably think you're the one who'd offed *Kanata* from the Central Headquarters' Annihilators."

"Eh? That's the first time I heard that! Why would they think that?"

"*Kanata* was a powerful Mushitsuki. Something around Blaze Class Rank 3. I obviously wouldn't be able to do it but even Mushibane doesn't have any Mushitsuki strong enough to take care of him. —*Aijisupa* joined Mushibane only recently so the SEPB wouldn't have any data on him. On the other hand there were also no traces of *Fuyuhotaru* having fought there... And even I who served to monitor someone related to a Rank 1 member was defeated. Not to mention you disappearing so suspiciously."

"I'm not a Mushitsuki!"

"It's worse than that. It's because you were once an Original Three. — Anyhow, Central Headquarters can't stay calm. Since they regard a powerful Fusion Type Mushitsuki as great danger they'll try to kill them without any regard to their appearance."

Even this late, Chiharu shuddered at the situation she was thrust into. Even though her classmates always told her she had no sense of danger it was obvious.

Chiharu and Chami exchanged their personal items which were the glasses and the cap and wore them. Since only Chiharu's hair was long she braided it, attempting a makeover.

She felt the disguise wasn't reliable, but according to Chami "you're good at everything you do. You look like a different person" apparently.

"So we're here because we have to get you protection as soon as possible. Don't make me explain it again and again. —Aya, stay vigilant for now."

"The number of telegraph poles from Nishito City along the railway is 13,583."

Aya who sat near the window mumbled this while keeping gazing intently at the outside scenery. Only she was in her school uniform like always. "These guys... they don't listen to me at all..." Chami cursed.

"Yes, there's no doubt that the fact of you – *Kakkou*'s older sister Kusuriya Chiharu going missing was revealed to Mushibane."

Chami raised her cap with her index finger, looking at the outside scenery. Perhaps she was affected by Aya's zealous gaze.

"Is that so?"

"Having Mushibane find out about *Kakkou*'s disappearance so easily is the proof above all. Mushibane split into a *Fuyuhotaru* faction and extremist faction so we can't tell where they'd gotten the information from. Didn't your sister say so, Aya?"

"Now it's 13,652."

"Wow, you have an amazing dynamic vision, Aya."

"...There's a spy in Mushibane. Their goal is Mushibane's self-destruction, taking out a dangerous person such as *Kakkou* along with them if possible."

Chami asserted casually. Chiharu tilted her head.

"Spy?"

"Yeah. Most likely – the SEPB'S Central Headquarters sent some person quite close to the core. That spy also caused Mushibane's remnants to fight against *Kakkou* during Haji Senri's escort mission in Housawa Town. And they're trying to do the same thing again."

"I don't really get it but... if you can understand so much you sure are smart, Chami-chan."

The one to respond to Chiharu's honest impressions was Aya. She moved her gaze from the window to her.

"It's natural. There's no one who could beat Chami in evil schemes."

"...I don't think that's really a compliment, Aya-chan."

"Even if you're not me you can understand it by thinking a little. Mushibane are nothing but a gathering of idiots. Without any advisor – someone with brains, they'd left command, fighting and everything else to Lady Bird. Those idiots at Mushibane didn't even realize she wasn't the kind of person able to calmly think up battle plans. But Lady's done a good job creating such a large organization all by herself without any councilors."

Perhaps growing angrier while speaking, Chami's tone gradually became louder.

"If I had to say, the one who's killed Lady was none other than Mushibane itself. If they had any brains, they wouldn't have gotten caught in Haji Keigo's schemes. Since everyone was so captivated by Lady battling in the center of the stage they didn't try going on the stage themselves. Lady kept fighting alone without any actors in supporting roles – and fell. And before I could drag her down myself."

Just like Aya said, apparently Chami didn't like it when the 'story' progressed in places she didn't know about.

Konomura Chami was also a Mushitsuki.

This girl kept pursuing her dream – her unfulfilled aspiration.

"So is Shiika-chan the leader now instead of that Lady?"

Chiharu inquired Chami.

"Shiika-chan... won't become like Lady, right?"

"Since *Fuyuhotaru* has powerful assistants, *Aijisupa* and *Namie*, it probably won't go that easily. But as expected they only have fighting power. In the end the SEPB has Miguruma Yaeko and Haji Keigo – he's still unconscious, but anyway it's obvious they're gonna lead them by the nose. *Aijisupa* seems to have a fast mind, but he's probably not the type to carefully refine battle strategies."

Chami sneered.

"Let me declare. It appears like *Fuyuhotaru* is trying to borrow the powers of Mushibane's small fries, but as long as she couldn't use them well they will definitely hold her back. Just like it was with Lady. Does *Fuyuhotaru* even have the talent to make use of pawns, I wonder?"

"...So what if it was you, Chami-chan?"

"What?"

"I find what Shiika's trying to do very praiseworthy. If you'd assist her... wouldn't it be of great help?"

Chami seemed unexpectedly shaken at Chiharu's words. She glared back at her in wonder.

At some point even Aya looked at Chami. Both their gazes focused on her.

"D-don't be stupid. Why do I have to help Mushibane anyway? I'll never follow anyone's orders."

"It's not following orders, you're joining forces. Even now you're trying to have the East Central Branch protect me because you're very smart but lack power, right?"

Chami bit her lips in regret.

Chiharu's group was heading to Ouka City—

The city where the East Central Branch was located.

In this situation where they only had Aya as a fighter they wouldn't be able to protect Chiharu if anything happened.

That's when Chami schemed her next plan.

During the same time Chiharu got 'safeguarded' by the East Central Branch she would hear stories related to him from his Branch, allowing her to work towards fully recovering her memories.

Chami would go off separately and join up with *Konoha* to search for Daisuke.

Chiharu would be allowed to reunite with Daisuke after they find him on the condition she would definitely return to Chami's side— That was what the two people exchanged as a deal – no, as a promise.

"So if you and Shiika-chan combine you'll be invincible! The strongest combo!"

Chami averted her gaze as Chiharu got excited. She laughed from her nose.

"Ha, so stupid. It's not like I want to get friendly with *Fuyuhotaru*. We were enemies at 'URBAN'... and obviously a Secret Class 1 Rank like her wouldn't even notice small fries like me."

"Don't be so humble! You're someone who can do anything you set your mind on! Or... do you possibly have no confidence?"

"Hah? Watch your words. We're speaking about something beyond stupid people."

"I'm not stupid, I'm normal! You're too stubborn over trivial things, Chami-chan! That's why you'll be plain no matter how much time passes!"

"Plain—why you... I'll kill you!"

Chiharu and Chami grabbed each other's clothes, yet Aya didn't try to stop them. She once again looked outside the window and started counting the telegraph poles.

"Say, Chami."

—When Aya muttered this Chiharu and Chami sat down and averted their gazes from each other. Both had their hair ruffled and wore a sullen expression. Since even the glasses were broken the disguise was a failure.

"...What?"

"For you Chiharu is a valuable source of information. You need the memories related to the Original Three to find out what Mushi are."

Chiharu and Chami turned a puzzled face to Aya who started abruptly talking.

"But it's different with me. When I die, if you'll able to control *Fuyuhotaru* just like what Chiharu said before you'll gain enough fighting strength."

"Just when I wondered what you're going to say... I have no intention of cooperating with *Fuyuhotaru* and even you alone are working enough for me. Don't prattle on about dying without my permission."

"I was just thinking. Don't mind it."

Saying this with a machine-like tone, Aya again gazed outside the window.

Chami frowned, but she didn't press her any further.

"Well then, it's about time I move to another car."

Rising from her seat, Chami looked down at Chiharu and Aya.

"Chiharu will be 'protected' at the East Central Branch and wait for contact from me. While you're sheltered I'll join up with *Konoha* and go look for *Kakkou*."

Chiharu nodded at her words.

"Aya, you stay with Chiharu no matter what happens. Don't say anything. Don't do anything. But if you conclude the East Central Branch can't protect her then you do it and bring her to me."

Aya slightly nodded.

"The next time we'll meet – will be after I find *Kakkou*."

"Yes!"

"Yeah."

After the three looked at each other Chami moved forward and left the car.

Chiharu, left with Aya on the last car, stared at the scenery flowing outside the window absentmindedly.

From the slightly opened window she could smell Ouka City's wind.

It had the smell of a metropolitan city different from Nishito City.

"Daisuke lives here."

A smile naturally rose to her lips. Possibly realizing she was talking to herself, Aya stayed silent.

To Whom It May Concern, how are you doing—

By seeing the scenery flowing by, her "narrating" habit came out unconsciously.

I came to where you live at. It's quite the big city. ...You might not be here right now, but I wonder if you living here means you're stylish?

The sea perhaps being close, the smell of seawater carried by the wind faintly tickled her nostrils.

"I wonder if you've been meeting many people here. Just like I did in Nishito City."

Unable to suppress her exaltation, she ended up speaking out of her mouth.

"Did you make friends? Or a girlfriend... if you do have one, you have to properly introduce her to your sister."

While smiling somewhat mischievously, the announcement informing them of arrival at Ouka Station echoed inside the car.

The rapid-transit train decelerated and stopped.

Suddenly the car became dark.

The front car arriving at Ouka Station was surrounded by a strange group.

They were people equipped with machine-like goggles covering their whole faces and wearing pitch-black long coats. On the entrance to the train station it was obvious, but footsteps also echoed outside the window and on top of the roof. They entered the car as if slipping through, restrained the other passengers and pressed them against the walls.

Even Chiharu and Aya were surrounded by black coats while sitting. They didn't even have the time to stand up.

Yet Chiharu wasn't agitated. Aya was also calm.

It was just like Chami told them. Since they used public transit, they were instantly caught by the information network of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Chiharu rode on the train to Ouka City to purposely let herself be 'safeguarded' by them.

Right now Chami should be making her escape through a different car. She managed to escape through the window just before the train completely stopped.

"Kusuriya Chiharu-san, right?"

Appearing from between the black coats was a suit-wearing woman. The young woman, having bed hair and holding some documents, spoke in a nervous tone.

"Let me see, you will explain the small details of the situation later, but right now you are in an extremely dangerous position... We will have you come with us, the representatives of a government body. We will also hear about your reasons to come to Ouka City later."

She heard about the special features of the East Central Branch's Acting Branch Director from Chami. So she was probably Goroumaru Touko.

"Kusuriya Chiharu-san. We will take you into custody under the control of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau."

Surveying the people surrounding her, Chiharu grinned.

She rose and bowed at the woman who was her brother's boss.

"Nice to meet you. Thank you for taking care of my cute brother."

Raising her face, Chiharu first inquired the most important thing of all.

"—By the way, Daisuke's a good kid who's kinder than anyone, right?"

2.01 The Others

Parting from Chiharu and Aya, Chami came to Akamaki City.

She changed trains to come there with just a low-worn cap as her disguise, but the Environmental Preservation Bureau probably didn't even care about a small member like her.

"Joining up with *Fuyuhotaru*? You sure like shitty ideas."

While mumbling to herself, she walked through the city aiming for her destination.

Akamaki City was the center of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, the city where the stronghold of the Central Headquarters was located. High-rise buildings were lined up in the town center. Coming to Akamaki City for the first time, Chami inhaled the big city's air shrouded by the smell of exhaust gas and grimaced.

"And over there is, right... the princess who started the fight to save Mushitsuki. She made a reliable knight her ally and went to battle."

She set foot inside one of the buildings lined up along the main street. It was an especially tall office building even among those in the town center.

"For now, I'm just—"

The guard in the building's entrance tried to stop Chami.

Without even looking at his face, she lightly waved her arm.

Immediately after, a scarlet shadow rising from her arm converged at the guard's back. The crimson glowing queen bee stabbed its sharp stinger into the man's medulla oblongata.

"A cowardly, dirty witch who only has enough brains to put poison in an apple —"

The queen bee that only Chami could see was absorbed inside the guard. "Uh, ah..." he groaned and stopped moving.

Konomura Chami's Mushi ability was mental pollution. It amplified the affected person's strongest emotion, robbing them of their rational thinking. Depending on the density of the pollution she could easily dull one's thinking ability to make them easier to be manipulated like she did to Sugitsu Aya, or make one not know between back and front like she did to the guard in front of her.

"Nothing more than a supporting role that aims for the main character dancing at the center of the stage out of jealousy."

Passing next to the guard who was standing in place like a puppet, Chami headed for the elevator.

Pressing the button, the door opened immediately.

She boarded the empty elevator.

In front of Chami's eyes leaning against the wall, the button indicating the highest floor was lighted up on its own. The elevator's door closed slowly.

"You haven't been tailed by anyone, right *Konoha*?"

Chami's voice reverberated inside.

Immediately after she thought her vision was warped, an atypically-shaped monster appeared in front of her.

It was a large Mushi with a body that looked like two overlapping leaves with large eyes attached. Next to the leaf beetle that possessed the ability to erase its form by controlling the refractive index of light, a girl was standing in front of the floor buttons.

"..."

She was Blaze Class Rank 4 member of the fighting squad of Central Headquarters, *Konoha*. She wore the Central Headquarters' white coat and was equipped with goggles. This silent girl who showed Chami her back was another pawn that had her ability transplanted into her and listened to her orders.

"At least answer."

"S-sorry... It's fine, nobody saw me..."

When Chami lightly kicked her back Konoha mumbled a response.

"C'mon, don't dawdle in your report. Do it already."

"I-I'll report properly... s-so don't kick me that much..."

The emotion controlling Konoha was 'anger'. Since Chami had also planted the minimal amount of her ability inside her, it was necessary to periodically stimulate her feelings like this.

"It seems like neither Central Headquarters nor the East Central Branch were able to find *Kakkou* yet..."

Even while the white coat girl bit her lips in humiliation she started her report just like she was told to.

"But I know something's going on in Central Headquarters. I can't extract any information as a Rank 4 member just like it was in Nishito City..."

"Meaning they're the Annihilators under the direct control of Miguruma Yaeko – *Kanata's* comrades."

Chami had already grasped the existence of the special team composed of the high-ranked members known as the Annihilators. They didn't officially exist but she confirmed their existence through *Konoha* with the happenings in Housawa Town and Nishito City's 'URBAN'.

"Just like it was in Houzawa Town. Central Headquarters wants to erase *Kakkou*. Since the East Central Branch lost contact with him and he has no support right now it's truly the golden opportunity to assassinate him. The Central Headquarters' information collecting abilities are impressive. They'll definitely find him."

"I've been probing into the Central Headquarters' movements for a few days... but just now I was able to confirm that several teams were dispatched. They're all members I've never seen before, but most likely – they're all very strong."

Chami clicked her tongue.

"Having a different team of Annihilators search for *Kakkou* at this timing – shit, so Chiharu's whereabouts were exposed. As I thought, their speed of

gathering information is abnormal."

"Is Chiharu fine...?"

"I can only put my hopes on the East Central Branch and Aya."

As she asserted this bitterly, an electronic sound echoed near Chami's ear.

The elevator reached the highest floor. The two climbed out, going up the stairs in front of them.

Exiting to the rooftop, the townscape of Akamaki City spread out beneath.

A sudden gust made Chami's cap fly in the air. Aiming toward the Ferris wheel visible from afar, the hat flew in the skies of Akamaki City.

"We'll only do what we can from here, *Konoha*."

"Right..."

Next to *Konoha* who proceeded to the center of the rooftop, the atypically-shaped leaf beetle swelled its body further. In the center of its body that was three times larger than *Konoha* glaring eyes started observing the scenery in front of them. The leaf beetle's legs stretched, connecting with a certain terminal on Konoha's goggles.

"Being unable to mobilize you for the assassination mission of an SEPB member is really unfortunate. Well, it would probably take some time, but if it's your ability it should be within the day—"

"Condition designation, completed. Distant viewing, magnification designation, completed. —Unlimited mode, released..."

The moment *Konoha*'s voice echoed, the leaf beetle's body swelled at once like a balloon.

"Wha-"

As Chami stared in shock the leaf beetle's eyes protruded out of its body like telescope lenses.

"Starting search..."

"*Konoha*... W-what on earth is this...?"

"It can view not just in a straight line from observation points... It can even trace along reflective objects such as mirrors, glasses and human pupils, reflecting even blind spots. Even if something's hidden, it's sure to be reflected by something. —I've been feeling great lately. I've greatly expanded my probing range so I can view anything other than hidden rooms..."

Chami became speechless.

Not only Aya but even *Konoha* apparently had her abilities grow rapidly. It was no longer at the level of simply 'feeling great' they both said.

"*Konoha*... don't tell Central Headquarters about this ability. You should remain a Rank 4 for the present moment."

"Why...? O-ouch, I get it, I'll do what you said, don't kick me..."

Until now she was just one person with searching abilities, but if her abilities became too powerful she wouldn't be a Blaze Class but a Secret Class – and there was the possibility of Central Headquarters treating her as a secret weapon against their enemies who were building up their strength. If that happened then it would be difficult for Chami to get in contact with her like she did until now.

While she was thinking this, *Konoha* raised her voice.

"—Found him. Concluded to be the actual *Kakkou*."

A chill ran up Chami's nape at this much too quick of a discovery announcement.

If she ends up being controlled by Central Headquarters... I'll be found out instantly— "So slow. Stop slacking off."

"S-sorry... O-ouch..."

"C'mon, report already."

"He's barely in the range of my ability... Quite far away... also—"

While grimacing due to Chami's kicks, *Konoha* spoke.

"He's fighting."

Chami clicked her tongue. She could imagine who his opponents were even

without asking. She was apparently one step behind.

"...I'll ask just in case, who?"

"A group of Mushitsuki with white masks..."

"Mushibane – there's no way those idiots could find *Kakkou* independently. So that means they're once again dancing in the palm of someone's hands."

Spitting this out, Chami turned her body.

"Let's go. We'll swipe a car or bike or something. If you use your ability to hide us we'll probably be able to escape the Central Headquarters' search network."

"What'll we do...?"

"Evil schemes are my specialty. I'll send them a poisoned apple to teach them that."

If *Kakkou* was heading somewhere by his own volition he apparently had a goal.

Intending to find out the truth with her own eyes, Chami left the place.

2.02 Daisuke Part 3

*

On the way back from Shiou Elementary School.

Daisuke carried his backpack, hurrying back home in a half-run.

Rushing down the hill road stretching from school, he entered the residential area.

"Even though Mitsuki was the one to say we should go back together, that guy..."

Although he made a displeased expression, on the inside he wasn't all that angry.

Ever since he made friends with his classmate known as Tsumura Mitsuki he started hating going to school less.

Now Daisuke didn't get involved with any of his classmates. His desk wasn't being hidden, and he didn't kill time until after school on the rooftop.

Most importantly, now that his older sister Chiharu knew he made a friend, she stopped meddling more than was necessary. If she went back to where she belonged to, Daisuke thought he could get along with her a little.

As Daisuke went to turn in a corner of the deserted residential area, a woman appeared in front of him. She was a tall woman wearing a crimson-colored long coat. Her round sunglasses reflected the setting sun.

"A much tastier... a much more passionate dream—"

As he passed next to her, the woman muttered.

It was a voice sleek enough to make him shudder. For an instant it looked like the woman licked her lips. As if – she was baring her uncontrollable appetite that came just after drinking a rich wine.

Turning around while feeling the chills, he couldn't see the woman anymore. He was too scared to confirm whether she disappeared to the other side of the corner.

Daisuke kicked the ground as if trying to escape.

"Ah, Mitsuki."

When he found his friend's back he was used to seeing on the road ahead he felt relieved.

"What's up with you, you were the one who said we should go home together. Don't go back on your own."

Approaching him, he smiled. The weak Mitsuki was again the target of his mean classmates. Daisuke promised to protect him.

Yet Mitsuki ignored him and kept walking ahead.

"...? Hey, Mitsuki."

Mitsuki shook off Daisuke's hand that reached to his shoulder to stop him.

Turning around, Mitsuki was smiling.

It was a smile that looked down on Daisuke – as if he was a completely different person.

"__"

Mitsuki moved his mouth.

The sound of the fiercely blowing sudden gust of wind soon erased his words.

Yet only Daisuke could hear what he had mouthed.

—*Daisuke-kun, I don't need you anymore*—

It took him time to understand the meaning of those words.

—*Because I became strong*—

When he understood them he stopped thinking.

"...y."

Turning a deaf ear to Daisuke's faint voice, Mitsuki left.

Daisuke stood in place alone.

"Why... Mitsuki..."

As Daisuke muttered this in shock, a purple shining scale passed in front of his eyes.

*

At that time five years ago he perhaps became self-conscious for the first time.

I'm—

Perhaps he came to know the true identity of the anger and anxiousness he harbored for the first time.

Not needed by anyone—

He was weak because he was small.

He was pure because he was small.

He probably only thought about it simplistically in black and white.

I want a place to belong to—

It wasn't the class where, rather than nobody even noticing him, his very being there sowed the seeds of dispute.

Nor next to his apathetic mother who didn't even notice he was injured.

Nor next to his temporary friend who used him just like a tool to compensate for his weakness.

Nor next to his sister who was far too kind and even sacrificed herself to protect him.

He wanted a place different from those.

If there was such a place in the world, he would need nothing else— So he wished.

"...!"

—He was apparently about to lose his consciousness due to his fatigue.

The scenes of five years ago flashed in front of him.

As Daisuke was pulled back into reality, in front of him appeared a large mouthpart – the form of a Mushi who tried biting his head off.

"Tch...!"

His long coat fluttering, Daisuke caught that mouth with both hands.

Having fused with the Cleridae insect, his arm used all of his strength to rip the Mushi's jaws from top to bottom. He pounded it against the ground as if performing a shoulder throw, using his fists to hit the Mushi's stomach as its legs raged violently.

The Mushi's body burst with an explosive roar. Cracks ran through the bare rock on the ground and a large column of water rose up.

"Haah...! Haah...!"

While breathing heavily, he turned a sharp gaze to his surroundings.

The group of white masks surrounding Daisuke stopped their movements for a second after being pressed by an intimidating air. One of them fell down with a thud. He was probably the host of the Mushi Daisuke had crushed to death.

Two days passed since he cut off contact at Nishito City's 'URBAN'.

Daisuke kept running single-mindedly, not having any sleep and not using public transit to weave through the searching network of Central Headquarters and Mushibane.

He avoided public attention as much as possible but he was probably sighted somewhere. Just as he left the urban area Mushibane's members attacked him all at once.

Daisuke right now was at a mountainous region far from the highway. In order to cross it he went not through the road but followed along the creek, getting surrounded by Mushibane without noticing.

He already turned the tables on about ten people, but Mushibane didn't give up. They leapt at him one after another.

"We won't let you rest! Everyone attack!"

The boy accompanied by a Mushi resembling a longhorn beetle raised a voice of anger. He, who was called *Sinica* by his comrades, seemed to be the leader of the white masks.

Daisuke dodged, running down the creek. Stopping the fangs of the Mushi standing in his way, he punched its compound eyes. This Mushi covered by a solid carapace was blown away, mowing down the trees around it and shattering to pieces.

Although Daisuke had fused with his Mushi to reinforce his body, the white masks flinched from seeing him defeat Mushi with his bare hands.

Although they surpassed him in numbers, the difference in their strength was evident.

"M-monster... he's not human...!"

"Of course he's a human! Him getting weaker is the proof! Just a bit more!"

Sinica's voice issued orders, yet he also sounded impatient.

"Shit, where did Rin go to? If that guy was here—"

"Kh..."

As Daisuke tried running his consciousness dimmed for an instant again.

Both his mind and body were exhausted due to the accumulated fatigue of two days and overuse of his Mushi's power. Although he had preserved his energy by not using his pistol attacks that had a severe consumption, it was evident that the more the battle dragged on the more he was at a disadvantage.

The white masks attacked Daisuke who was still able to muster his willpower.

"What's a 'fight to not fight' supposed to mean...! That's a load of bullshit!"

How many Mushi had he killed?

Several white masks were collapsed sporadically in the mountain.

Not even looking aside as he went down the creek, Daisuke could already not even feel himself fighting. He simply defeated the Mushi blocking his way mechanically.

Crushing a Mushi's head with his fist, he kicked a tree and used the recoil to leap. He stabbed his arm through the abdomen of another Mushi that tried attacking from the sky and used the force of his fall to pound it on the rocks.

The scattered Mushi's bodily fluids rained down on Daisuke and the white masks.

"I'll never forgive only you fucker! *Kakkou*... only you..."

The hatred spat out by *Sinica* kept passing through Daisuke's ears.

These were words filled with pure resentment.

"Lady was our hope as Mushitsuki...! And yet you killed her...!"

Aiming at Daisuke, a severed tree collapsed.

As he jumped over it, a Mushi that vibrated its wings to fly assaulted him.

"You've killed... Our Lady...!"

Gunfire reverberated all over the mountain.

The bullet shot from the instantly drawn automatic pistol pulverized the Mushi.

"*Kakkou*... only you I'll..."

"Uooooohhhh!!!"

Daisuke howled. The green pattern covering his body emitted a dim glow.

Every time he swung his fist, unleashed a kick, pulled the trigger, and pulverized a Mushi leaving nothing behind, one of the white masks collapsed. — An endless line of Fallens was created near the creek as Daisuke rushed downstream.

He leapt as if rolling forward, swinging down his fist aiming at the Mushi inside the creek. As he crushed it the remainder of the shockwave blew fiercely, reversing the creek's flow for a moment.

It was the last of the people wearing white masks.

As silence again descended on the mountains, *Sinica* stood there with his face revealed, stricken by despair.

"..."

While breathing heavily, Daisuke calmly glared at him.

Had they really thought they could win against Daisuke with just numbers? The only member of Mushibane able to fight equally against him was Lady Bird – Tachibana Rina. Mushibane should have been aware of that more than anyone else.

By them being able to find him before anyone else he felt as if he caught a glimpse of the person pulling the strings from behind.

"...Hey, *Kakkou*..."

Sinica mumbled as Daisuke readied his pistol wordlessly.

"In the end... what did Lady say...? Before she died... has she left anything behind for us, even a single word... has she said any final words...?"

Acknowledging his defeat, *Sinica* inquired Daisuke.

Looking at his figure, Daisuke also realized.

Even while in the midst of fighting him, they didn't look at him at all.

Sinica only sought Rina's traces – the form of their past leader that was etched into their hearts even after she had lost her life. While assaulted by the sneaking fear due to their being Mushitsuki, Rina was probably their only light of hope. Mushibane admired and clung to her that much.

"'I finally remembered it'—"

Daisuke calmly said.

—*I had already lost long ago... to my own Mushi...*

Just before she perished in his arms, Rina was smiling.

This girl, who wasted herself away for the sake of Mushitsuki and fought until the end, smiled happily.

"'My real dream... was to find a place I belong to and become happy' – she said this and smiled until just before her dream was completely eaten by her Mushi."

"...!"

Sinica raised his face. He became speechless, but as if finally understanding he hanged his head.

"Right... that's obvious. Lady was a Mushitsuki just like us. Even though she had her own dream we made her forget it... We made her shoulder way too many things..."

"..."

"Lady fought in order to protect Mushibane, and because of that her dream was consumed by her Mushi... and she died... you didn't kill her after all..."

A clear drop streamed along his cheek. The droplet of water falling to his feet merged with the creek, flowing downstream toward Daisuke.

He neither affirmed nor denied *Sinica's* words.

Daisuke couldn't fully describe his feelings toward the girl known as Tachibana Rina even in his heart.

"—I'll be the last."

The longhorn beetle at *Sinica's* feet shook its antennae.

"The Mushibane shouldered by Lady ends with me. From now on *Fuyuhotaru* – no, Snow Fly will make a new Mushibane. She vowed to keep fighting until she ends the fight of Mushitsuki. She's strong. Because you see, she completely ignores you and the SEPB bastards."

Fuyuhotaru.

Anmoto Shiika also possessed the same dream as Daisuke and Rina.

Were these three fated to meet up and fight each other by a mere coincidence or was it because they all shared the same dream? He had no idea.

But from now on he would end fighting against the Mushibane led by Shiika.

Daisuke naturally exerted power into his fist grasping the pistol.

"So I'll fight you without reserve. This isn't to avenge Lady – but to protect my own dream!"

The longhorn beetle leapt, aiming for Daisuke.

He gritted his teeth. Just as he was about to pull the trigger— "[Kakkou was careless] – [Rin attacks!]"

"...!"

A disk with a sharp blade appeared from the leaping longhorn beetle.

—No, several glowing disks penetrated through the longhorn beetle from a blind spot, flying toward Daisuke.

He immediately protected using his blade-resistant long coat. Yet his body received the impact and he was blown away.



As Daisuke crashed into a tree, a mass of rocks rushed from inside the creek. The Mushi made of countless rocks tackled him.

"Gwahhh!"

The super weight tackle shook the mountain. Sandwiched between trees and rocks, Daisuke's bones of his whole body creaked.

"[2-combo attack success] – [Critical hit]! [Kakkou received 128 damage]!"

Three black figures surrounded Daisuke from a distance as he fell to his knees.

In front of him stood a small boy. On top of a cube shirt he wore the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's long coat. He wore a warped smile on his face that had eye black smeared under both eyes.

The light disks were lined up around the eye black boy – Rin. These lined up disks were probably his Mushi, as they sprouted countless legs and crawled all over his body, becoming a common rough woodlouse. It seemed like a Minion Type Mushi, but it being freely able to change itself meant it was a Special Type.

As he thought there was a woman wearing the SEPB coat near the creek. At the feet of the woman hiding her face with goggles and a mask some rocks rose, forming a large Mushi. He realized that she was also a Special Type Mushitsuki.

Further downstream was another man with a coat, goggles and mask. The Mushi next to him was familiar. The Mushi had an antenna-like shaking feelers and a round body – it was the Mushi who possessed the ability of wiretapping he had fought at Nishito City's 'URBAN'.

"You bastard... Rin—"

Next to the longhorn beetle that scattered its bodily fluids, *Sinica* dropped to his knees.

"Thank you for becoming a sacrificial pawn meant to weaken *Kakkou*... [Rin attacks]."

Lowering his head, Rin launched the disks. The several sharp disks assaulted the longhorn beetle writhing in pain on the ground and cruelly tore it to shreds.

"...!"

"[*Sinica* received 286 damage] – [Rin defeated *Sinica*]."

Looking at *Sinica* who collapsed without making a sound, Rin grinned.

Even while grimacing in pain, Daisuke stood up.

"—So you're the Annihilation Squad...!"

The group that attacked Daisuke at 'URBAN'.

And the boy in front of his eyes who incited Mushibane, including *Sinica*, to be used as sacrificial pawns against him.

The existence of the antenna Mushi confirmed the connection between them.

Rin shook his head sideways.

"[Rin shook his head] – No... Our official name is the Annihilators..."

The combat unit under the direct control of Central Headquarters' Vice-Director Miguruma Yaeko – the Annihilators.

The team that existed not to capture existences that were a nuisance to the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau but only to erase them finally revealed themselves in front of Daisuke.

"So you were the ones to incite Mushibane at Housawa Town... with Senri...!"

"[Rin nodded] – Mushibane's a bunch of idiots..."

In contrast to Daisuke who raised his tone, Rin whispered in a faint voice.

"Fusion Type Mushitsuki are dangerous... Now that Lady's dead and Harukiyo is with us you're too dangerous, *Kakkou*-kun..."

"...Ha."

Daisuke laughed off.

"That's what Miguruma decided? That woman sure knows how to treat us Fusion Type Mushitsuki the worst."

"[Rin tilted his head] – We'll stop speaking here... [Rin attacks]."

Aiming for Daisuke who stood stock still, the countless disks assaulted him.

"Tch...!"

Clicking his tongue, Daisuke leapt to the side to evade the attack. Kicking the ground, he shortened the distance between him and Rin in an instant.

Aiming for the now defenseless boy, he pulled the handgun's trigger.

The bullet, strengthened by the fusion with the Cleridae insect, hit Rin squarely. A large explosion gouged the ground, causing a dust of cloud to swallow up the boy. However— "[Rin has defended] – [Rin received no damage]."

Rin, gathering disks as a shield, looked at Daisuke with a composed face.

Using the opening of Daisuke's agitation, the aggregation of rocks dropped on him. He reflexively swung his free arm.

Yet before his fist could hit it, the rock crumbled down with a rattling sound. As Daisuke hit the empty air, other rocks behind him piled up to become a Mushi.

"Gwaaah...!"

Since his back was defenseless, the legs of the rock Mushi sent him flying.

As Daisuke was helplessly tossed into the creek, the disks, mass of rocks as well as the antenna Mushi all aimed for him.

"You're completely exhausted already, *Kakkou*-kun... [Rin attacks]."

As a result of receiving a direct attack, Daisuke's limbs were temporarily paralyzed. He couldn't evade the attacks.

Even so, the moment he tried rising up—

Just as they were on the verge of colliding with him, a single pallid butterfly appeared between them.

On the butterfly's wings that scattered crackling sparks was a pattern in the shape of the letter C.

"...!"

Immediately after Daisuke rolled away from the creek's flow— An electric vortex filled his vision.

"WAAAAHHHH!"

Rin's shriek was erased by the thunderous roar that sounded like a lightning strike.

The flash of light connecting the creek with the sky pierced the Mushi that attempted attacking Daisuke.

Dyed in deep red by the generated heat, the Mushi made of rocks – crumbled apart.

Electric currents surged out of the surface of the antenna Mushi, breaking it to pieces as if it blew up from the inside.

"U-uhh...! [Rin was attacked] – [Rin received 160 damage]..."

Making use of most of his disks for protection, only Rin was able to escape the lightning strike.

But by the time he retreated from the creek Daisuke had already thrust his handgun through the shield of disks.

Flames spurted out of the muzzle inside which the bullet rotated at high speeds.

"I wanted to preserve as much energy as I could, but..."

"[Rin defended—eh...?]"

The loud bombardment sound shook the mountain.

The attack ejected from the muzzle shot through Rin. Gouging the ground and making trees collapse, it destroyed everything upward in a straight line.

Rin, receiving Daisuke's full-powered attack, collapsed on top of the caved-in ground. Although he was definitely not dead, most of the disks protecting him had lost their shape.

"Haah... Haah...!"

Immediately after escaping danger, extreme fatigue assaulted Daisuke. He became exhausted and collapsed face-up.

"*Kakkou*-san."

A familiar voice came from inside the creek.

The crisp and composed voice of a girl echoed from the goggles of the collapsed woman inside the creek. The white-bluish electric current coming from downstream was connected to them.

"I judged it to be a dangerous situation based on the sounds I have heard through the goggles and so launched an attack. If you are safe then please respond."

"So it's you, C..."

There was the girl known as C who belonged to the Central Headquarters as a Secret Class Rank 2 member. She had once belonged to the East Central Branch and she was also Daisuke's acquaintance. Her Special Type Mushi possessed an ability of the same nature as electrons.

It really was a tight spot. If he hadn't been saved by C he would've definitely been hit directly by the enemies' attack.

"—Please do not think I have saved you just yet."

Although Daisuke relaxed his battle stance, the girl's voice was cold.

"Branch Director Assistant Ishimaki came to Central Headquarters by the orders of East Central Branch Acting Branch Director Goroumaru Touko. They sought my ability to aid their search of you, *Kakkou*-san. And in secret."

Touko-san did—

His boss Goroumaru Touko.

Since Daisuke himself cut off contact, what sort of decision has she made?

"She had apparently conjectured that the Annihilators would probably find you. Therefore I have inserted my Mushi into an Annihilator's goggle, probing their movements. For us Special Type Mushitsuki, as long as it is through our medium we can display our ability even from long range ... And I have actually been able to find you."

If possible he wanted to reach his destination without anyone finding out.

But apparently this thinking was naïve.

The Annihilators used the information network of the Special Environmental

Preservation Bureau and Mushibane, further allowing C to use them to find Daisuke.

Even as Daisuke moved in avoidance of human eyes it apparently did nothing but buy some time.

"I have accepted Acting Branch Director Goroumaru Touko's appeal for cooperation because I wanted to ask you."

For the first time C raised a voice that exposed some emotion.

"Why have you run away from the SEPB...! What on earth is your goal...!"

C was a powerful Mushitsuki, but she was actually only an elementary school student. She implored him.

"I have endured this far only because you are in the SEPB! Becoming a Mushitsuki, being captured by the SEPB... Even during the time of my transfer from the East Central Branch to Central Headquarters, I could tolerate it only because you were in the SEPB, *Kakkou*-san! Even now... they made me a Secret Class in order to make use of my abilities for those horrible experiments—"

"—I've secured *Minmin* at Nishito City."

"...!"

"Her reversion from a Fallen was clearly made by a different cause than what happened with *Fuyuhotaru*... As far as I can tell from the disk Ebina Yuu had given me, the one who did this – was you, C, right? What on earth is Central Headquarters trying to do?"

"T-that is..."

"More than that, *Minmin* even said that the SEPB is hiding of the Original Three. If that's true... Then I definitely can't say where I'm going now or what I'm trying to do."

He asserted it clearly. He could tell C gulped.

"I-if so, what about the East Central Branch? This transmission will not remain on the records of the SEPB. Acting Branch Director Goroumaru also wants to ascertain your true intentions and so appealed for my cooperation. While Branch Director Haji has yet to regain his consciousness, the East Central Branch

could..."

East Central Branch.

It was the organization that Daisuke belonged to ever since becoming a Mushitsuki. He had acquired his fighting power there together with the man known as Haji Keigo.

He had certainly considered relying on them.

But his conclusion was to not do that.

It was impossible for the current East Central Branch.

If he were to borrow someone's powers—

"...Where's Harukiyo now?"

"Harukiyo...? You said Harukiyo? Why would you disregard the East Central Branch and think about that suspicious man of all people...!"

Clear disgust oozed out of the girl's voice.

"He is probably still in hiding. Otherwise he would have been sent directly as your assassin when the Annihilators had been dispatched. In the first place his relationship with Vice-Director Miguruma is not quite clear..."

"Just imagining it made me sick, but... If Harukiyo was here, then even now... now that Rina's gone, the only one who's left is *Fuyuhotaru*... me or Harukiyo..."

"*Kakkou*-san...? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind – I'm just talking to myself."

Exhaling, Daisuke roused his body. Strength left his arms that supported his body and his face crashed into the ground. Acknowledging his fatigue, he mustered his power to stand up.

As he thought he would have to do it all by himself—

"*Kakkou*-san."

C hounded Daisuke who started walking.

"Why will you not tell me anything? Why will you not rely on me? I believe that you will one day finish the battle of Mushitsuki... You were able to fight

even in this unreasonable organization of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau...!"

"—Since I was always alone, I will keep being so."

"...!"

"So stop relying on me, C."

So you could fight with your Mushi even when I'm gone—

He added this part only in his heart.

"I-I am..."

Dragging his legs, Daisuke descended along the creek.

"Because I believe in you, *Kakkou*-san...!"

C's voice coming through the goggles was slightly shaking.

"—I understand."

The girl's voice said coolly as if she turned into a completely different person.

"Central Headquarters member Secret Class Rank 2 C has now confirmed that *Kakkou* broke away. I will at once report to Vice-Director General Miguruma and officially apply for the capturing of said member from Central Headquarters. On top of reporting the same to Acting Branch Director Goroumaru we will cooperate with the East Central Branch in the capture of said member."

"Tell that to Touko-san as well."

Daisuke asserted without even turning around.

"Leave me be. Because I don't want any more needless sacrifices."

"At the time Central Headquarters officially gives its decision, all branches will operate under orders to capture *Kakkou*."

Ignoring Daisuke's words, C kept talking in a mechanical tone.

"The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau will eliminate *Kakkou* using its full power!"

Bluish-white sparks scattered from the goggles of the woman who was turned

into a Fallen.

"—Please do not forget that since I know your birth data I can conjecture your destination from the angle you are heading in...!"

C probably absolved her ability. And with that he couldn't hear the girl's voice any longer.

"..."

Daisuke wordlessly went downstream.

Walking for a while, his field of vision suddenly opened up.

A small townscape spread out below him.

A nostalgic smell drifted on the moist wind.

Daisuke came to Shiou City.

To his birthplace.

2.03 Chiharu Part 5

*

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

This peaceful daily life would continue.

From now on forever.

So she decided.

And if it was in order to protect her precious days and the one precious to her — "You sure love your brother, Chiharu."

On the residential district back from school, her female friend walking at her side said.

"Yup."

Chiharu, with a backpack on her back, nodded carefreely.

"There should be limits to that love though! No matter how much you want to protect your brother, trying to fight against Elviolene is... I can't believe it! Unbilibable!"

Aria Varej yelled noisily inside Chiharu.

"We were saved because El took it easy on us, but if you try fighting her again we'll definitely be killed! We have no chance!"

Probably quite angry, Aria scolded her about the happening the other day whenever possible. Luckily, she was able to regain her consciousness and run from the place before the police showed up, but the destroyed road was even now being repaired.

"To begin with, 'that power' you used is an ability meant for fusing but you

purposely made it unstable! Trying to break down Elviolene by not restoring the space you fused with – if you keep using your power so forcibly even your body will crumble down! I told you my power isn't meant for battle!"

Ignoring Aria's endless preaching, Chiharu was all smiles.

"I'm Daisuke's sister after all. I pamper him so much to the extent he hates it."

"...I-is that so... Oh, talk of the devil."

Her friend pointed at the road ahead.

"...!"

A rich smell so sweet it could make one choke made Chiharu lost control of herself for a second.

Daisuke was walking alone. He appeared to have heard Chiharu's conversation. Glancing at her, he half-ran ahead.

"Chiharu? What's wrong?"

—Starting yesterday.

The presence of the dream drifting from Daisuke became exceptionally mellow.

She bit her lips so hard she tore them and tasted blood.

Chiharu mustered all of the reason she could, preserving her self-control.

"Sorry, I'm going ahead!"

"Eh... W-wait, jeez! Chiharu!"

Leaving her friend behind, Chiharu pursued Daisuke.

"It's the deadline, Chiharu. —He's already 'ripe'."

Aria said in a cold tone.

"Why...! Why did Daisuke's dream suddenly—"

Pursuing Daisuke, she tried reaching for his shoulder.

But she gave up the idea and drew back her hand. She had the feeling that if she touched him even once she would end up forcibly eating his dream.

"Wait, Daisuke. Let's go back together?"

Lining up next to him, she directed a smile at him.

"..."

"So you're not going with your friend today, huh. Tsumura Mitsuki, was it?"

As she innocently inquired, Daisuke bit his lips for a second.

"That guy..."

Her brother said with a cold face and a chilly voice – as if the smile she had seen before was a mere illusion.

"—He said that he doesn't need me anymore."

Chiharu widened her eyes.

"He said that he doesn't need me because he became stronger."

Daisuke's voice had neither anger nor any hatred at Mitsuki's betrayal.

There was just emptiness.

Concealing his emotions, his heart became empty and shouted that it wanted to be filled.

"El didn't simply wait around—"

Aria said.

"She also 'seasoned' him. To make her desired dream fit her tastes."

Chiharu's hair swayed. As she was about to lose herself, her hair emitted a blue glow.

She wants to eat Daisuke's dream... And just because of that she...?

The final reservations she held in her heart snapped off.

Chiharu came to know of an enemy that wanted to destroy her happy daily life in the truest sense.

Elviolene.

As long as *Oogui* was near Chiharu and Daisuke they wouldn't be able to return to their happy days.

"—It's definitely your misunderstanding, Daisuke."

She hid the anger that seemed to burn her.

She concealed a certain decision in her chest.

"There's no way your friend would say something like that. Try asking him again tomorrow."

—Chiharu smiled.

"You'll definitely be able to make up with Mitsuki-kun tomorrow! Yup, no doubt about it!"

Daisuke stayed expressionless, but ended up nodding.

"...Yeah."

"Ehehe. Daisuke's a kind, good boy."

As Chiharu smiled at him, Daisuke embarrassedly turned his face away. Yet he didn't seem about to run away like always.

"...Hey, Chiharu. You should give up and accept it. No matter what you'd do you can't beat Ei. So if you were the one to eat your brother's dream he would obviously be much happier—"

Why—

Chiharu howled in her heart.

...Why do I have to forget about him!

"...!"

Aria became speechless at her much too dreadful fury.

She stroked her brother's head.

As the sister and brother walked back home, the sky above them was dyed in orange by the sunset.

"And even if you don't make up, your sister will always be with you."

She said while smiling carefreely.

While crying in her heart she thought.

...This sky too...? Your face too...? Will I lose all of it...?

Daisuke grimaced.

"N-no way I want that. That's called being a stalker."

"I'm not a stalker. It's normal."

She thought.

...Then, I... who on earth will I become?

If Chiharu were to eat Daisuke's dream.

If she forgot all about her one and only brother.

She would also lose her desire to protect him.

"...It's painful only now."

Aria's voice said this silently, yet it also seemed like it was trying to endure something.

"You will forget it all – even your doubts now... your pain as well, everything."

Still smiling, Chiharu clenched her teeth.

Isn't that... too cruel!

"Ah, right. I forgot something at school."

Chiharu stood in place.

I will turn my brother Daisuke into a Mushitsuki despite being his sister... and I'll even forget all about this horrible thing...? That's the most horrible thing of all...

Daisuke turned to look back.

"I'll go get it back in a jiffy. You go home first, Daisuke."

"..."

"What's wrong? Where's your reply?"

"...It's just that you seemed about to cry just now."

You see—

She spoke toward Aria inside her.

Daisuke can understand other people's pain, he's a very kind and good kid—
"Even I can... understand that by looking at him..."

Chiharu made a wide smile.

"I just got some dirt in my eyes. It's just that, really."

"..."

"Be careful on the way back. Tell mom I'll be a bit late."

Leaving these words behind, Chiharu went back to the road to school.



She sprinted back to the elementary school visible on top of the hill with the setting sun behind it.

The children going back home passed next to her as she climbed the hill road.

"...I've told you this before."

Aria spoke to Chiharu with a calm voice.

Passing through the gate, she entered the school grounds.

"There wasn't a single time where I wasn't able to eat the dream I targeted."

Too impatient to even switch her shoes, she ran through the corridors and up the stairway.

"Because that's how we are. We appear in places that have delicious dreams. We were reborn to be that way. That's why we never let a dream get away without eating it."

Second floor, third floor, she was climbing up the now mostly empty stairway.

"Is that what you'd call fate? Until now Aria Varei always ate the dreams it could lay eyes on. No matter what happened in the end it always became like this. But you know—"

When she reached the fourth floor, a door appeared in front of her.

Chiharu's hair shone in blue.

"I actually always thought about it. What if... what if I had enough power to destroy that thing called destiny or whatever, and could just shift its gears just a little bit—"

Unleashing Aria Varei's power, Chiharu stretched her hand toward the door.

Her fingers fused with the metal-made door, slipping through to the other side.

"If the umpteenth Aria Varei would be able to live without eating anyone's dream one day ... I wonder how that would be. What would happen to the Aria Varei left behind in a dream?"

Slipping through the door, Chiharu came to the rooftop.

On the rooftop bathed by the orange setting sun she saw the form of a boy.

"But, being too scared to make sure... wanting to fall into a pleasant sleep... and finding out far too delicious dreams... none of the Aria Vareis wanted to do this, but – I have always thought about this from the bottom of my heart."

Aria's soliloquy passed through Chiharu, flowing with the wind.

"...Huh? I thought I'd closed the door with the key."

The boy who turned back was Tsumura Mitsuki.

Next to him was a large Mushi – a monster with the smell of Elviolene. Chiharu came there in pursuit of that scent.

As the Mushi spread its wings a large mass of light floated above its head.

"Listen, I have a favor to ask, Mitsuki-kun."

Chiharu walked approaching Mitsuki.

"A favor?"

Although Chiharu suddenly appeared in front of him, Mitsuki was calm. At the same time the Mushi also turned toward her.

"Will you not keep being friends with my brother... with Daisuke?"

She stood in front of Mitsuki and smiled wryly.

"If I tell you this Daisuke will get mad at me again though... but you're his friend, right Mitsuki-kun? So it has nothing to do with the fact you've turned into a Mushitsuki—"

"I don't need Daisuke-kun anymore."

Mitsuki grinned.

"Because I became stronger than him. —And it's not just Daisuke-kun. I also don't need this school where nothing interesting ever happens."

What was the boy trying to do there with the power of his Mushi?

From the moment Chiharu came to face him she realized.

"S-stop that... if you destroy the school now the people still inside will be killed."

"Ah, right."

Mitsuki smiled enjoyably.

Just like – the same smile as the one who turned him into a Mushitsuki, Elviolene.

"Even if I destroy the school it wouldn't serve as a proof that I became stronger than Daisuke-kun. So I'll have to finish him off tomorrow."

The string of hope Chiharu was desperately trying to grab snapped in her hands.

"He's a lost cause, Chiharu... The time period when one just became a Mushitsuki makes them very unstable. The recoil at having his dream eaten, having a Mushi planted in him and being reborn as a Mushitsuki – would make him rampage at any small opportunity."

"It's dangerous so you can look from the side, Daisuke-kun's sister."

Next to Mitsuki, the sphere of light floating above the Mushi swelled. Chiharu realized it was a mass of vast energy.

"You can't, Mitsuki-kun... stop that..."

And yet even looking at Chiharu who seemed she was about to cling to him, Mitsuki didn't stop. The Mushi seemed like it would burst the accumulated energy any moment now— "...It's not your fault, Chiharu."

A blue-colored radiance coiled around Chiharu's right arm as she swung it downward.

Following the traces drawn by her arm, the concrete floor was gouged out.

Not only the ground, but even the sphere of light and a large part of the body of Mitsuki's Mushi suddenly vanished with space itself.

Unable to endure the recoil, Chiharu's right hand was ripped together with her clothes.

"So you don't have to cry."

The light from Mitsuki's pupils gazing at Chiharu vanished. With the Mushi's body melting into thin air, its host Mitsuki collapsed on the spot like a doll.

—As the sun set, the elementary school was enveloped by darkness in no time.

At some point clouds covered the sky, obstructing the sparkling stars.

"...Say, Aria."

Sitting on the center of the roof, she buried her face in her hugged knees.

She took Tsumura Mitsuki to the infirmary. As he had his Mushi killed and turned into a Fallen, he would probably be taken to the hospital tomorrow morning. According to Aria, from there the organization known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau would probably take care of him. Outwardly they were just a government agency, but were actually an existence meant to manage Mushitsuki.

"Do you hate me?"

Chiharu's right arm was dyed deep red by blood. It wasn't such a serious wound that she couldn't move it. Also, this was something she heard from Aria, but apparently since she became Aria Varej she had much faster natural healing ability than normal people. Aria told her it would heal up quickly.

"Obviously I hate you! You won't let me tell you anything about me and you always act rashly! You're the number one problem child even among the Aria Varej until now! And since we're one in mind and body I also became like that!"

The usually mischievous Aria turned serious and said.

"I loathe you! And I'll keep hating you for eternity! No matter how much time passes, I'll hate you forever!"

Chiharu raised her face.

Her tears were already gone.

"Yeah, that's right. You can stay inside me... forever."

"..."

"It's fine already, Aria."

Rising up, Chiharu's hair was enveloped by a blue glow.

"You really are an idiot."

"I'm not an idiot, I'm normal."

Chiharu's laugh and Aria's laugh overlapped.

They had the same personality and same voice.

The two Chiharus were Aria Varei.

"You're here, right Elviolene? Come out."

In reply to the summon of a fellow Original Three, purple scales started pouring down.

Appearing from the distorted darkness of the night was a beauty wearing a crimson coat.

Elviolene narrowed her rainbow-colored eyes behind her round sunglasses.

"What a lovely night, Aria Varei."

Chiharu kicked the ground, aiming at the woman sneering joyfully. Light burst at her feet.

The next moment, blue traces gouged out the right half of the woman's body.

Using the backlash of the energy created at her feet, Chiharu instantly rushed next to Elviolene. She attacked the woman's body the moment she passed next to her.

"I won't let anyone eat Daisuke's dream. Not even you, Elviolene... not even the Aria Varei inside me."

Following the movements of her arm as she swung it around was a blue glow.

"—So that's your answer, Aria."

In front of Chiharu's eyes purple-colored scaled burst out of Elviolene's body. These formed rhinoceros beetles about as big as a finger and the hundreds of them transformed into the right half of her body that had been gouged out.

"This kid known as Chiharu is really thoughtless. Or just an idiot."

As Chiharu saw the woman's body regenerating in front of her eyes, Aria inside her spoke.

"But she's not uncomfortable. Maybe she's actually... even more pleasant

than going to sleep again."

"Although you keep on sleeping you have found your safe haven."

"—Although you keep on eating you will never be sated."

"So we have no choice but to fight, Aria Vareii."

"—Let's fight, Elviolene."

The blue glow surrounding Chiharu tore the downpour of purple scales to pieces.

*

A beetle car driven by Goroumaru Touko scampered on the empty bypass road.

"Hashiba City is part of the bay coast of Ouka City that was reclaimed and built up. All roads connecting to the land including railways, two highways and a bridge were shut down, forbidding any transport except for related personnel. Hashiba City is a de facto solitary island, acknowledged as a unified domain under the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, but we call it the following – 'GARDEN'."

Grasping the steering wheel, Touko explained in a detached tone.

"'GARDEN'..."

Sitting in the passenger seat next to her, Chiharu repeated Touko's words in her mouth.

Ahead of the road constructed above the sea a small town could be seen. Tall buildings and structures resembling radio towers were crowded atop the ocean.

From the other direction, Ouka City in the back mirror was growing smaller. If one was willing to go without a care and take their time it was probably possible to cross it by foot.

"So I'm going to be confined there?"

"You are actually going to be taken into custody. Well, that is how it's going to be on paper though."

Touko in the driver's seat wore a slovenly smile.

"Umm, let me just confirm this again – are you really not a Mushitsuki, Chiharu-san?"

Touko's eyes looking ahead glanced at Chiharu. She nodded.

"I'm not."

"What do you say, Senri-san?"

Touko moved her line of sight to the back mirror.

"I cannot really tell in a state where the Mushi is not out though..."

The girl known as Haji Senri sitting in the back seat raised her face. Next to her was the boy known as Ogata Akatsuki in the full attire of the SEP. They both served as escorts to take Chiharu to Hashiba City.

Also, there was another girl in the back seat.

Sugitsuna Aya. She, who was caught by the East Central Branch along with Chiharu, hadn't spoken even a single word, complying with Chami's orders. She gazed outside the window expressionlessly.

"As long as we are talking about what I've 'seen' until coming here, she feels like a normal person."

"Is that so. Good, I'm relieved."

Touko wore a reassured smile. Senri turned her face to Aya.

"This person does seem to be a Mushitsuki though..."

"..."

"Aya-san, was it? You sure are untalkative,ahaha."

Looking at Aya reflected in the back mirror, Touko showed a forced smile.

"Umm, Chiharu-san, so you said you've heard about the East Central Branch from the member who monitored you and that's why you came to Ouka City?"

"Yes."

"But that guardian died during the fight at 'URBAN'. Does that mean her corpse wasn't discovered due to being eaten by the enemy Mushi? Aya-san is a Mushibane member living in Nishito City who was coincidentally Chiharu's

friend from a while back and rescued you..."

Chiharu nodded.

On top of aiming to be taken into custody by the East Central Branch, Chami handed her two strict conditions.

One was for Chiharu to never reveal that she used to be Aria Vareli.

The second was to make it as if Chami had died.

"That must have been quite the gruesome sight to personally witness. You have my sympathies."

Touko who was facing forward while driving spoke with an unchanged tone. She seemed like she was simply a good-natured older lady rather than the boss of an organization, but Chiharu couldn't tell if she really wasn't thinking about anything.

"I cannot call your accidental involvement in the battle between *Fuyuhotaru* and the Annihilation Squad anything other than misfortunate, but having that shock cause you to recall about Daisuke you've forgotten for five years... how should I say it, could it be fate? Don't you think so, Akatsuki-san?"

"I'm not going to hate this person just because she's *Kakkou*'s relative. But—"

The tone of Akatsuki sitting in the back seat was stiff. Although he was saying that, he knew he wasn't able to fully conceal his complicated state of mind.

This boy called Ogata Akatsuki also hated Daisuke—

"I think that her story is too convenient. Especially the part about her memories."

"Akatsuki-kun."

Senri rebuked Akatsuki.

"That's right. As a matter of fact, the situation is quite severe."

Touko scratched her cheek with a troubled face.

"Whatever the truth may be, the situation right now looks as if... Chiharu-san is the same kind of Mushitsuki like *Kakkou*-kun and also defeated the Annihilation Squad."

"..."

"Even Central Headquarters, which doesn't only lack any stance toward active annihilation of the Original Three but actually tacitly consent to their existence, search tenaciously for the Prototype Mushi that gives birth to Fusion Types – for *Sanbikime* in order to destroy it. I believe that is because they cannot handle Fusion Type Mushitsuki both because of their abilities and their personalities."

Tahaha, Touko added a strained laugh.

"On top of Chiharu seeming like an actually powerful Mushitsuki, if she ends up contacting her brother Daisuke-san... From the point of view of Central Headquarters they probably want to assassinate the siblings before that happens. This isn't at the level of mere capture."

Chiharu looked at Touko's profile with a meek expression.

"That is why I would like to hide Chiharu-san in the housing facility of 'GARDEN' for a while. If it's there then information won't leak out and we could prepare for enemies from the outside."

"Yes."

—So far everything had developed the way Chami predicted it to. Even the reason for Chiharu to be targeted and even her being guarded by the East Central Branch all went according to Chami's guesses.

Just like this she would be sheltered by the East Central Branch.

In the meanwhile Chami and Konoha would make the arrangements to search for Daisuke.

"But I am surprised; this is the first time I've heard Dai-kun has a sister. Neither him nor my brother ever said anything about that even once."

The one who said this was Haji Senri. From her way of speaking she apparently knew Daisuke well. Chiharu turned around and inquired her.

"Say, Senri-chan, can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Daisuke... my brother, what kind of a kid is he?"

Senri smiled at Chiharu's question.

"He's very kind. At the very least in front of me..."

She switched her gaze to Akatsuki. The boy grimaced for an instant, averting his eyes to the window.

"...I will not say anything. I have no reason to discomfort you."

The boy and girl took the exact opposite attitude.

So Chiharu still couldn't understand.

"I see... Okay, thank you."

Senri frankly felt positive toward Daisuke. On the other hand, despite Akatsuki hating Daisuke, he held himself back in worry for his sister Chiharu.

Senri and Akatsuki were both kind, and for that reason their completely opposite attitudes toward Daisuke were also probably honest.

"You both are kind and good kids."

They seemed surprised at her words. Senri's cheeks reddened and Akatsuki uttered a confused "Wha...", clearly feeling embarrassed.

"Starting here is the facility known as 'GARDEN'."

Touko said when they passed the bridge.

Having this scenery in front of her eyes, Chiharu was lost for words.

It was like a ground zero.

There were places in front of the station where the ground became bare in a wide range, and rows of buildings were destroyed in a radius of hundreds of meters. The site was probably currently under construction as there was heavy machinery here and there.

"Apparently Daisuke-san fought with Lady Bird, Mushibane's leader here. Most of the damage was done by Lady Bird alone... Her Mushi had Matured here – making its host die."

The beetle car Chiharu's group rode on passed in front of the station that turned into ruins.

Akatsuki grimaced. He denied with a rigid tone.

"I do not believe it. The only one to testify Rina had Matured is *Kakkou* himself...!"

"Since I was not actually a part of this battle, I can't say anything. But apart from *Kakkou*-san there were also other people to have seen this sight."

Chiharu widened her eyes.

Various people were walking through the streets of Hashiba City as the beetle passed.

There were many boys and girls, but all of them were expressionless. They looked ahead with lifeless eyes like glass beads, going through the part of town that stayed safe.

They were dolls without a shred of emotion that would mechanically obey any order.

"T-these people, are all of them... Fallen—"

"'GARDEN' is an isolation facility for Fallens established independently by the East Central Branch, as well as an experiment facility. Only a few experimenters and inspectors are allowed to give them minimal orders in order to collect data about how much of a normal life Fallens could live. In the past *Fuyuhotaru*, Anmoto Shiika-san, was also kept here."

Looking at Chiharu slightly shuddering, Touko continued.

"Just like Shiika-san, close to half of those housed in 'GARDEN' – are the people who were made Fallen by *Kakkou*-san."

"...!"

She reflexively held her mouth that was about to emit a scream.

The huge amount of Fallens existing before Chiharu's eyes...

If they were all created by Daisuke, then without any doubt—

"D-Daisuke... did that—"

Tears streamed down Chiharu's cheek.

"Because I—"

Ate Daisuke's dream and turned him into a Mushitsuki—

Her last words were blurred without forming a voice.

Aria... Hey, Aria—

Chiharu spoke toward her other self that was no longer inside of her.

It's just like I thought. If I turned Daisuke into a Mushitsuki – Both Daisuke as well as the people around him would be pained... They would be fighting, hurting, losing... And even though I knew this would happen— "Why...! Why did I...!"

Why had she turned Daisuke into a Mushitsuki?

She remembered turning her brother into a Mushitsuki by her own hands. The sweet, mellow taste of his dream that bewitched her definitely remained in her memories.

Yet she still couldn't fully remember the instant she had turned him into a Mushitsuki— "—May I inquire something, Chiharu-san?"

The one to call to Chiharu as she was losing herself was Touko. She spoke with a calm face.

"In these five years you have spent separated from Daisuke-san... were you happy?"

Chiharu looked at the older woman with tear-filled eyes.

Even before understanding the meaning of her question she could feel anger welling inside her.

Unbearable anger toward herself.

"—Yes."

She was much too happy, to the extent it actually conversely made her anxious.

Chiharu was happy.

That was the sin she could never compensate for.

Turning her brother into a Mushitsuki, forgetting everything, knowing nothing of battle, Chiharu spent happy days without a care in the world.

"Daisuke's first mission was apparently four years ago."

Touko smiled and said.

"The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau couldn't suppress the rampage of the small girl known as *Fuyuhotaru*. But apparently there were people who planned to take advantage of that chaos for a coup d'état. The one to solve both incidents was Daisuke-san. He turned *Fuyuhotaru* into a Fallen, as well as the Mushitsuki used for the coup d'état."

Daisuke robbed the dreams of many Mushitsuki. —She could tell that from the scene in front of her eyes. Chiharu couldn't tell why Touko was cornering her even further with what she was saying.

"I cannot deny the fact that Daisuke-san deprived many dreams. But if at the time he hadn't done that... *Fuyuhotaru* would have had her dream consumed by her own Mushi and would have probably lost her life. The coup d'état would have succeeded, perhaps involving this country in war. —I will repeat this, but Daisuke did this all on his own. He alone shouldered their pain, and as a result was able to preserve the peace of this country. He was able to protect your peaceful life—"

Chiharu looked at Touko with eyes open wide.

"Even Daisuke-san himself probably hesitated countless times. He was probably about to lose many times. But every time he faced forward and he continues to fight even now. Since you're his sister you can surely understand how hard that must be, right?"

Chiharu suppressed her tears with an effort. She couldn't allow herself to cry anymore.

"—Yes, I do."

She nodded and raised her face.

It was just like Touko said. If his one and only sister Chiharu didn't believe in him, then who would?

No matter what she saw, Chiharu would believe in Daisuke.

"Because Daisuke's my cute little brother."

She showed a grin.

"Because Daisuke, both in the past and now... is a strong kid who's kinder than anyone."

—And that was why she had to meet him.

She was the one who made him shoulder so many burdens.

Chiharu had to be punished by her brother's hands.

If she could bear but a little of the pain that burdened him—

"There are presences approaching us."

Said Senri, her voice colored by tension. Her face was directed to the exterior of the city, above the ocean.

"They are numbered over twenty – and all of them are powerful Mushitsuki...!"

"Ehh?"

In a complete reversal from how she was until now Touko raised a pathetic voice.

Looking ahead through the windshield, even Chiharu could see shadows that seemed like flying Mushi here and there.

They were aiming for the beetle that came out to the coastland road in a straight line.

"O-our pursuers already came? So it's definitely the Annihilation Squad. There's still some distance until the base..."

"I will submit a request for backup from the nearby 'GARDEN' monitoring squad."

Akatsuki operated his goggles. It probably had wireless functions. Putting a hand on his goggles flashing with red lights, he sought help by talking quickly.

"It is coming...!"

The instant Senri said this one of the shadows dancing in the skies accelerated forward like a missile.

A vividly colored bud-looking object came flying with great speed. It pierced into the ground directly in front of their vehicle.

The bud spread out as if a flower blossoming.

Inside it was a girl wearing a black mask. Changing from a bud into a flower was a Mushi with a flat body and long legs. Stretching its petal-like wings, the Mushi that let the girl ride on its back opened its large mouthpart. A white fog gushed out to a vast range.

"Awawa!"

Touko turned the steering wheel, making the beetle come to a sudden stop.

In front of the spinning vehicle, the road touched by the fog melted along with a rotten smell.

"C-Chiharu-san, Aya-san, get outside! Quickly!"

"Y-yes!"

Including Chiharu, five people hurriedly got off the car.

While they faltered the black masks landed in Hashiba City one after another. Their uniformly equipped coats and masks seemed to be made of the same materials as the ones of Akatsuki and Senri.

Touko pulled out a small handgun from her pocket.

"Get down!"

Akatsuki stepped forward to cover for the women. A Mushi covered in a golden outline appeared. It was a mayfly with countless holes on its abdomen. Its shining split rear slapped the ground.

Immediately afterward other people dressed like Akatsuki showed themselves from here and there within 'GARDEN'.

The East Central Branch monitoring squad members all spread out to protect Chiharu and the rest along with Akatsuki.

The black masks attacked them all at once with their Mushi.

"Why you...!"

Behind Akatsuki the golden mayfly waved its tail around. Dozens of lasers beams were launched from the holes in its abdomen.

"Wha—"

There were an overwhelming number of light beams, but the first to get hit was only the Mushi emitting a poisonous gas. The other black masks moved orderly, entirely evading the heat rays.

"A-as strong as expected... We don't seem to have time to disperse our attacks. Crush them one by one, Akatsuki-san...!"

Beginning with Touko's order, the battle between the black masks and the East Central Branch commenced.

Although the numbers of the East Central Branch were superior, the difference in fighting strength was evident. Other than Akatsuki, the Mushi who fought to protect Chiharu and the rest were killed one after another.

"A...ahhh..."

A shuddering welled up from deep within Chiharu's body.

One Mushitsuki and then another became Fallen in front of her eyes.

All in order to protect her—

"This is the Annihilator Squad – all of them possess power in the level of Blaze Class Ranks 5 to 3... I've resolved myself, but this might be a bit too intense."

While readying her gun Touko groaned. Senri bit her lips.

"I will also join the line of battle...!"

"You can't, Senri! On top of you not having finished your battle training yet, the recoil of your power is too big...!"

Being too preoccupied by Senri trying to step out, Akatsuki created an opening.

The black masks ignored the other members and settled their aims on him. Several Mushi attacked all at once.

"Kh..."

The mayfly at Akatsuki's back changed its orientation, but it didn't make it in time. It fired countless lasers, but the pursuing Mushi avoided its aim.

"—They can't win by using brute force."

Together with a monotone voice, Chiharu's hand was pulled.

Aya, who until now stood in complete silence, grabbed Chiharu's arm.

"Aya-chan...!"

Chiharu kicked the ground together with Aya. They got far from Akatsuki who was protecting them, running towards Hashiba City's streets.

"You can't, Chiharu-san!"

Touko shouted.

The Mushi that tried attacking Akatsuki cleanly stopped their movements. Changing their aim, they started chasing Chiharu and Aya.

"So stupid...!"

Clicking his tongue, Akatsuki tried attacking the Mushi pursuing Chiharu. Yet he was checked back by the black masks, unable to move from the spot.

Along with several black masks, Chiharu and Aya were leaving through the coastal road. From the roadway they ran into an alley sandwiched between tall buildings.

"No matter how strong that Akatsuki is, since he needs to protect many people he'll eventually be destroyed."

"W-where are we going, Aya-chan?"

"We're shaking off our pursuers."

Saying this, Aya put her hand around Chiharu's waist and forcibly flung her away to the side.

"Kyaaa!"

Chiharu's scream and the sound of the concrete exploding overlapped.

Several Mushi stabbed their sharp claws into the space she had occupied just

now.

"Keep running, Chiharu."

As Chiharu crashed into a building, Aya said this while kicking the wall to leap high. Her Mushi the ground beetle clung to her left raised hand.

Aiming for the Mushi assembled on the ground, Aya swung her arm down. White light burst and a heated stake opened a large hole in the concrete ground.

But the enemies' Mushi were agile. They retreated and evaded Aya's attack with orderly movements.

"Go."

Complying with Aya's words, Chiharu rushed through the gap in the buildings. Aya waved her left arm against the Mushi that came pursuing from behind. The ground beetle spouted flames from its mouthpart, but as expected it served as nothing more than a diversion. Letting the explosion go past them, the black masks kept chasing after Chiharu with a slight delay.

"Hah...! Hah...!"

Appearing from between the buildings, she again came into a large roadway.

Arriving in the main street where various kinds of stores were lined up she was reminded of Nishito City's station road. There were sparse pedestrians on the sidewalk; they all kept walking expressionlessly without even turning around to look at the panting Chiharu.

Having seen this much too ordinary scene, Chiharu felt for an instant as if her being chased was nothing but a dream.

The pupils of the residents of 'GARDEN' whose daily lives had been decided didn't even reflect Chiharu.

"What an eerie place..."

Hearing Aya's calm voice along explosive sounds that shook her eardrums, Chiharu came to her senses.

Looking at Aya restraining the enemies from behind, she raised a shriek.

"Aya-chan...! Those wounds—"

"It's nothing. Let's go."

The hem of Aya's uniform was torn, lacerations carved on her flank. Her skirt and socks were dyed red with fresh blood. Yet the person herself just pushed Chiharu's back without her face even changing color.

"B-but...!"

"Don't make me say it again. My job is to protect you."

Being gazed by her black pupils, Chiharu grimaced. Unable to say anything, she crossed the road with Aya, rushing toward the opposite sidewalk.

It was a bizarre sight.

The town's residents didn't even spare a glance at Chiharu and Aya running. They even completely ignored the black masks chasing them from behind.

It was as if only around Chiharu and Aya were the events of a completely different world. She felt an enormous discomfort as if she was running through the screen of a movie theater surrounding her from all directions.

The two worlds would never touch each other, but they made contact by the sound echoing from behind. One of the black masks shouted: "You Fallens! Catch those long-haired girls!"

The next instant—

The people walking around all turned their heads.

"Hii—"

Being stared at by glass-like eyes, Chiharu unconsciously stopped in place.

Heading for the frozen Chiharu, the people who had lost their emotions lowered their bodies – and rushed to her in full speed as if being launched.

"It seems like it's too late to order them to stop."

Aya tried swinging her left arm but Chiharu hurriedly grabbed it.

"Y-you can't Aya-chan! These people—"

"I told you, my job is to protect you. —Also, it's not like I'm going to kill them."

Shaking off Chiharu's hand, Aya pounded her hand with the beetle into the ground.

A crimson explosion cracked the concrete, the resulting shockwave blowing off the Fallens.

She then aimed for a restaurant built along the road, wielding her arm. The white stake launched along with a flash of light bore a large hole into the glass wall.

"A spacious place is disadvantageous. Let's move to a place they can't enter."

Aya grabbed Chiharu's arm, setting foot inside the restaurant.

The inside was empty and no customers could be seen, not to mention employees. At least from the outside it seemed like none of the shops lined up in the road had any human figures inside them.

Immediately after, Aya turned back. Thrusting Chiharu's back away, Aya's figure vanished from her vision.

"Aya-cha—"

A dreadful thunderous roar shook the restaurant. A large Mushi assaulted Aya who was covering for Chiharu. She was thrust through the back of the building as she stopped the Mushi's mouthpart with her bare hands, scattering chairs and destroying the counter.

"Aya-chan!"

As the color of Chiharu's face changed and she attempted chasing her, a white light flashed in her vision.

The successive impacts opened a hole in the shop's wall.

"Here, Chiharu."

Stepping on the corpse of a large Mushi, Aya welcomed the rushing Chiharu. Although she was bleeding from the head and had wounds on her shoulders and arms, her expression hasn't changed in the slightest.

As if being irritated at Chiharu standing there speechless, she grabbed her arm and pulled her along forcefully.

Seeing the black masks enter the restaurant with a side-glance, they moved to the neighboring building through the hole in the wall.

In front of the running Chiharu the light and impacts continued to pierce through. Every time a wall or any obstacle appeared in front of her Aya destroyed it with her Mushi's power. They rushed while passing through restaurants, through bookstores and through boutiques.

Aya's blood scattered on Chiharu's cheeks. Looking at her covered in wounds, she shuddered.

Stop it already—

Chiharu opened her mouth trying to say that.

"I'll be troubled if you forget—"

Aya said as if stopping her from saying these words.

Having destroyed the wall in front of them and leaping through, a gentle breeze greeted them.

They arrived at the square in front of the station.

The land of the decisive battle between Daisuke and Lady Bird.

"Since you became Chami's pawn I will have you fulfill your role until the end."

Aya's hair fluttered with the wind blowing through. Looking around her, she pulled Chiharu's arm and leapt out to the square.

The two were headed to the bypass connected to Ouka City.

"Also... I told you I will start liking you, right?"

Following Chiharu and Aya, the black masks also jumped out of the building.

An earthquake assaulted 'GARDEN'.

The buildings both parties passed through crumbled one after another. Behind the running Chiharu and Aya, a building that lost its pillars crumbled along with the constructions around it.

"...!"

—If so then I'll also start liking you.

When they had infiltrated Mushibane's assembly, Aya told this to Chiharu.

Now she understood the meaning of her words.

Aya would not hesitate on anything as long as it was for the person she liked
— "Go alone from here, Chiharu."

As they entered the bypass floating on the ocean Aya stopped in place. While she pushed Chiharu's back a copious amount of blood was still flowing from her stomach.

"It's fine, I won't let them touch a single hair of yours."

Aya smiled.

"Don't do it, Aya-chan..."

Chiharu reached with her hand, yet she couldn't touch Aya.

Aya had already turned around.

She pounded her arm with the ground beetle on the head of the Mushi that was still trying to bite Chiharu. A stake glowing in pure white was shot from its mouthpart.

The bypass shook.

Along with a rumble, the Mushi and one side of the traffic lane crumbled and collapsed. Unable to support it, the breakwater wall fell into the ocean, raising a large wave.

"You can't, Aya-chan..."

While Chiharu stood still watching, Aya's battle with the black masks started.

The Annihilators moved to surround her, launching a simultaneous attack.

Aya kicked the ground. With speed comparable to a bullet she drove her left arm into a Mushi that formed one corner of the encirclement.

The stake that was launched accompanied by a white flash crushed it.

Aya faced the next Mushi in turn.

"Don't worry about me..."

Yet in the next moment she froze in place as if paralyzed.

A black liquid seeping from the ground crawled up her legs. Climbing on her back the liquid coagulated, forming a Mushi. Its countless legs tightly bound Aya's arms behind her back while its fanged mouthpart sank into her left shoulder.

"—"

Chiharu raised a shriek that didn't form a voice.

A Mushi several times larger than Aya tackled her now that her movements were sealed. Mixed with the vibration that was like two cars colliding, the sound of Aya's ribs breaking reached Chiharu's ears. As she widened her eyes a large cluster of blood was spat out of her mouth.

However—

"...Aya-chan, stop alrea—"

Aya's eyes glared at the Mushi that was trying to skewer her further.

Her ground beetle spread its wings. Flying away from Aya's arm, it landed atop the Mushi's head.

A crimson glow enveloped the Mushi. A highly pressurized heat gas burnt its body to a crisp.

The ground beetle, further spreading its wings and fluttering in air, started spouting a green liquid from its mouthpart.

It was a powerful acid. Writhing violently after being covered by the liquid, the Mushi absolved Aya's restraints. Alighting on her right arm, the ground beetle kept using the crimson stake to turn the writhing Mushi to cinders.

A dull noise shook Aya's body.

A Mushi's tail that stretched like a whip pierced through her chest and legs—
"NO—"

Another Mushi flying in the air lowered its abnormally long legs to the ocean. While it swallowed seawater like a pump with the tubes attached to its legs the Mushi's body swelled.

"—I'm fine, Chiharu."

Although Aya had a grave injury on her shoulders, her ribs were broken and her chest and legs were pierced through, she kept lacking any hesitation or fear. She glanced at Chiharu with her eyes that were rapidly losing their light.

"Until I fulfill – the role given to me – by Chami – I won't die."

Even while vomiting blood every time she spoke, Aya grabbed the tail of the Mushi stabbing her.

Exerting her power, she pulled the tail all at once.

The Mushi was blown into the air by brute force. With the Mushi drawn toward her, Aya readied her right arm.

The pure white flash blasted the long-tailed Mushi without leaving any trace.



"So— It's fine—"

Aya muttered with hollow pupils like a doll. She fell to her knees with a slump.

A highly-pressurized column of water fell from above. The Mushi spat out its stockpiled seawater.

"...AAHHH!"

Chiharu started rushing ahead without thinking. Embracing Aya who stood still, they rolled on the road.

The ground she just was on until now crumbled by a tremor. The concrete broken by water pressure fell into the sea with a loud sound.

"U... Uu..."

Brushing aside the groaning Chiharu, Aya stood up as if nothing happened.

Chiharu looked up at her from the ground.

She saw the sky over Aya's shoulder – she could see the ground beetle spreading its wings and landing on the Mushi fluttering in the air.

"So— You don't have to worry about anything— Stand up— Chiharu—"

A white flash filled her vision.

Having defeated the final Mushi, the ground beetle landed on Aya's shoulder.

"Stand up— Chiharu— You have to get away— At once—"

Aya showed her a smile.

It was the same smile she wore when she talked to her about Chami.

"Aya...chan—"

She was holding out her white arm yet Chiharu couldn't feel any power from it. She rose to her feet on her own as if being controlled by Aya's smile.

The harsh battles appeared to continue at 'GARDEN'. She could see countless laser beams shooting through the skies at the edge of her vision.

"Don't look—back—"

Aya's hand changed the orientation of Chiharu's body. She could feel a warm

sensation pushing on her back as she stood there dumbfounded.

"I told you—right? You're more important than me— The role given to you by Chami—"

Unable to resist, Chiharu stepped ahead like a puppet.

"You have to—meet your brother, right? —It would definitely help Chami someday—"

"Aya-chan... Aya...chan..."

"I'm fine—so—I'm not lonely anymore—so—"

"..."

"If Chami—and you—"

Chiharu was walking.

Ahead of her was Ouka City.

Behind her was 'GARDEN'.

"—Just—think about me—for an instant—someday—"

As Chiharu walked, she could hear—

A despairing sound from behind her.

The sound of something heavy collapsing on the ground.

The final reasoning power inside Chiharu broke off.

".....!"

Her hair drew an arc in the horizon.

Without any hesitation she turned around, rushing towards the collapsed girl.

She clung to the unmoving Aya, raising a loud voice.

She didn't even know herself what she was saying.

She simply wailed with no regards to her appearance.

The girl's body with closed eyes was slowly losing its warmth.

—An electronic sound echoed.

When she embraced Aya a cellphone fell out of her pocket.

It was something Chami had handed to her for communication.

Chiharu only picked it up unconsciously. She grabbed the device with both hands as if clinging to it.

The first words Chiharu said were nothing other than shouts.

Chami could probably guess it wasn't anything trivial. Her tension-filled voice hit Chiharu's eardrums.

"...What happened! Calm down! Chiharu!"

"Aya-chan...! Aya-chan...! To protect me she—"

As Chiharu lost her reason and shouted, she could tell Chami gulped.

Silence fell on the other side of the phone.

But before long—

"...She died?"

She heard an exceedingly cold voice.

Chiharu doubted her own ears.

"So please leave Aya there. You have to quickly—"

The cellphone creaked due to it being grasped far too strongly.

Hearing Chami's cold voice on top of seeing Aya's death—

Made Chiharu feel hatred toward a person for the first time in her life.

Although Aya had yearned for Chami so much and fought for her sake—

She summarized it with a single sentence.

"—No..."

"Chiharu?"

"I won't listen to what you say, Chami-chan. Aya-chan protected me—"

"...CHIHARU!!!"

The angry voice that seemed like it would break the cellphone thoroughly

smashed Chiharu's words.

Chami's jeers were thrust at the astonished Chiharu along with a ringing in her ears.

"Who the hell do you think you are! Some tragic heroine? That's why you're crying for the sake of the knight who died protecting you? We can probably turn you into a picture as you are now! That's what I imagine! Everyone in the audience to see you crying on top of the stage will surely choke on their tears! What would the BGM be? A ballad with a piano solo? Hah, that shit's simply the best!"

She could hear Chami clenching her molars through the phone.

"—But I don't give a shit about that! I'll have you follow my orders whether you like it or not! I'll lower the curtains and drag you off the stage even in the middle! I'll have you work according to my script! Don't let those who died of their own accord and even lost their audience seats grab you and drag you to the center of the stage!"

"...Chami...chan..."

I'm so stupid—

Just like her brother once told her.

She was stupid.

Even though Chami was so angry – not only has she looked back, she was even unable to stop her feelings, yet Chiharu wasn't able to notice any of that.

—Don't look back.

Even though Aya already knew.

The girl who died in order to protect her understood Chami until her very last moment.

And Chiharu looked back.

She stopped in place.

Right now she made a misunderstanding much more painful and sadder than anything— "...I found out where *Kakkou* is. Go to the place known as Shiou City.

He entered that town."

Chami asserted in a voice containing anger.

Shiou City.

A nostalgic name.

The town where, until five years ago, Chiharu had lived in together with her brother— "We intercepted *Kakkou's* conversation... this is bad. At this rate the entire SEPB might try to erase him. If that happens I'm not sure even he could survive this."

"...!"

"Go to Shiou City quickly, Chiharu. Meet up with your brother and regain all of your memories."

Chami didn't wait for a reply from the speechless Chiharu.

"Don't ever disobey me again. I have no need for a pawn that steers off the script in the middle."

One-sidedly asserting this, the call was hanged up.

Were her final words really directed at Chiharu or at Aya? She didn't have the time to make sure.

"...Aya-chan..."

Chiharu rose up.

She bit her lips while overlooking Aya sleeping peacefully.

"I'm... going..."

She deeply lowered her head.

"Thank you for saving me."

Raising her head, she forced herself to make a smile. She couldn't see her own face, but she probably made an unshapely smile.

"I'll remember you, Aya-chan. Always and forever."

She turned her body.

As she started walking and fastened her pace, Chiharu could hear a voice overhead.

"Found ya. Hello there, are you by any chance *Kakkou's* sister?"

Immediately after a girl swooped down from the sky.

She was a girl who wore a turban around her head and had black wings sprouting from her back. Chiharu realized her equipment was that of the East Central Branch.

"I'm gonna help you escape by urgent orders from Touko-san. Even though it wasn't supposed to be my turn here."

The girl looked at behind Chiharu and grinned.

Turning around, she could see more black masks coming from Hashiba City where the battles continued.

"Playing tag is my specialty. You have any request on where to go?"

There was but one place Chiharu wanted to go to.

She recalled the place that Chami and Aya had told her about—

And nodded clearly.

2.04 The Others

In the mountainous region where one could only hear the murmuring of a creek, a boy's groaning could also be heard.

"Uh... I have to report back to Headquarters..."

Static electricity still crackled in the flowing river.

The ground was gouged and traces of bombardment were engraved in the forest.

In the center of a collapsed rock Rin stood up. The other two members of the Annihilators turned into Fallens. Apparently he alone was able to barely survive.

Just as he tried walking back to Akamaki City, he was taken aback by surprise.

"Don't just go back on your own. I have a minor role to give to you too."

Chami standing with the forest behind her said in a voice with stifled anger.

Konoha was also waiting behind her. On their way there they had eavesdropped on the conversation between *Kakkou*, the boy called Rin and *C* using *Konoha*'s ability.

"R-[Rin encounters an enemy] – [Rin attacks]!"

Disks with a shining pattern appeared around Rin. However, some of them were cracked and their movements were clearly sluggish.

Chami rushed at Rin from the front.

"Chami...!"

Konoha's shout and the sounds of the disks slicing through the air overlapped.

The sharp disks cut Chami's cheeks, legs and stomach.

But all the wounds she received were shallow, none of them fatal. —Since her opponent had received great damage by *Kakkou* before, Chami judged that

conversely closing the distance between them was advantageous to her. Nevertheless she was risking her life because she barely possessed any fighting abilities.

"[Rin's attack hit]! [The enemy received 140 damage]! [Rin's consecutive attack]—"

"As if I'd let you!"

Chami's counterattack was faster than the disks' second attack by an instant.

"This is my shitty ability! Eat this!"

She shouted while closing the distance.

A crimson brilliance glittered at Rin's back. Spreading its wings majestically, the red queen bee stabbed its sharp stinger into the nape of his neck. It lost its shape like smoke and was absorbed into Rin's body from the point he was stung.

"[Rin was hit by the enemy's attack] – [Rin received no damage] – [No damage]—"

The disks rotating midair suddenly stopped their movements. Rin's face rapidly paled, his body trembling as if suffering convulsions.

The amount she inserted into him was on a whole different level than what she did with Aya or *Konoha*, a full-powered stinging. As long as Chami's ability hit, the target's mind would become disorderly and they would lose their composed rationality— "I don't feel like going around and controlling the stage from behind the scenes..."

Not even considering her wounds, Chami slowly approached Rin.

He bit his lips so strongly that blood came oozing out.

The nails of his clenched fist dug into his skin.

Chami now clearly recognized the enemy.

The Annihilators.

Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, Central Headquarters.

And – Miguruma Yaeko.

"I'm well aware that after all we can serve as no more than supporting roles. Even if I don't have *Owl* or *Aya* anymore, those who pretend to be the main roles will not notice at all. Right, my ambition to stand in the center of the stage sticks out too much... What a shitty dream. However—"

Her shaking voice was diverted by anger.

It was so *Konoha* at her back wouldn't see the single tear streaming down her cheek.

"Being able to show off this long continuing story would help me as well. Miguruma Yaeko who tries to keep the fight going forever... And *Kakkou* who will never be able to stop it! *Fuyuhotaru* too! You've all made the same offense!"

She tightly grabbed the face of Rin who stood in a daze with both hands and shouted.

"And so... I will steal the center of the stage from the main roles that never try getting off of it! I will make the other actors prostrate themselves and lower their heads with brute force! It will be like 'how's this best stage I'm showing you! You have no more regrets right! With that comes the final performance of the story of Mushitsuki, let's meet again another day!' Even if you don't like it I'll play the ending with the credits roll!"

If she stopped in place even once...

If she looked back even once...

She would be liable to become disheartened about her dream.

But the unseen hands of the person after person who had left her behind wouldn't allow her that. When she was about to give up those such as the laughing white cat or the lonely girl would push her back.

"How dare you... how dare you kill *Owl* and *Aya*... If you do all that and try to force a small role on me then I'll do the same. I'll say a line befitting a small fry. —Please pass it along to your masters pretending to have the main roles."

Tightly grabbing Rin's face, she asserted with a clear voice.

"Remember this'—"

The muddled consciousness boy responded with a start.

"I will definitely drag you off... Definitely... definitely...!"

Rin separated himself from Chami as she repeated herself in a stifled voice. He went down the creek while muttering something with a dazed attitude.

Probably due to her losing too much blood, strength left Chami's legs.

"Chami!"

Konoha rushed to Chami sitting on the ground.

"...You can use your ability to see to Shiou City even from here, right *Konoha*?"

"Y-yes. There really seems to be no doubt that *Kakkou*'s destination is Shiou City. He's moving through the town heading for somewhere."

"I see—"

Chami glared at the direction of Shiou City.

"Will you let me have a look? What made the main character – *Kakkou* come there, I wonder. Let me check with my own eyes what he's trying to accomplish there."

"Do you think Chiharu will make it in time?"

"If she doesn't I'm in trouble. Because I won't be able to unravel the mystery of Mushi unless she retrieves her full memories. If that doesn't happen I won't be able to win the battle ahead. Also... if my thinking is correct, there's still a way to use Chiharu."

While intently glaring at the sky of Shiou City, she clenched her fist. Her strongly clenched teeth creaked.

"Yes... if she dies I'll be in trouble. I'll never forgive her dying without my permission. Because I'll make anyone and everyone into my pawns."

Konoha nodded. Looking at Chami, she muttered in her usual small voice.

"It's fine... I will also always come along with you..."

"...That's obvious. I'll kick you."

A droplet of water fell atop Chami's cheek.

Night approached and rain began pouring from the gloomy, clouded sky.

"...!"

Chami felt as if she could see a purple glow from the sky of Shiou City through the gaps of the forest.

Feeling a chill run up her spine, she shuddered.

She could see an abnormal object between the dark clouds.

It was a much too large and a much too beautiful—

"N...no... way..."

She doubted her eyes but it actually existed in the sky of Shiou City.

"Impossible... That's impossible...! After all there's no way for anyone to tell where *they* would show up! A coincidence...? N-no, that's wrong. It can't be that *Kakkou* knew of it...?"

Next to Chami, *Konoha* also completely paled. She looked at the sky of Shiou City in shock.

"Why... how...? How could you tell she'd show up there, *Kakkou*...!"

By the side of the river that was being hit by rain and enveloped by darkness, Chami's muttering kept going on and on.

2.05 Daisuke Part 4

*

Daisuke, who was watching the TV in his apartment, looked outside the window.

The sun has set and it became quite dark.

It's about time, he thought and stood up.

"Chiharu's not back yet... Daisuke, could you go and look for her?"

"Sure."

Just like Daisuke thought, his worried mother called out to him.

His sister Chiharu lacked any sense of danger, and it was dangerous for her to even walk on the road. Even though she always ended up catching a cold and get a fever easily, she would push herself to her limits and make it even worse.

Having his mother prone to worry for her was the usual.

If Chiharu simply tarried a bit then their mother would make Daisuke go get her and he even remembered at what timing she would call to him.

But when I come back late she doesn't worry at all— Having such thoughts he normally wouldn't was probably due to him being in low spirits.

"I'm going."

Exiting the door, he went down the apartment's stairs.

He knew where he should go to.

Shiou Elementary School.

Chiharu said she had forgotten something at school and parted with him. Then she probably lost track of time while chatting with her friend or something.

"..."

Suddenly...

If Daisuke just ran away from home like this, would his mother worry?

Obviously – he was surprised at noticing he was unable to think that.

But he immediately decided to forget all about such silly thoughts.

At the very least there existed one person who actually cared about him.

Chiharu.

His sister was famed as being obsessed about her brother, so she would be extremely worried were he to disappear. She might even be so worried she would die of shock.

Thinking about that, Daisuke smiled unconsciously.

"Really, I have no choice, jeez. That meddling sister."

Running in the road, he headed to school.

He ran for some time while looking around him, but he couldn't see Chiharu anywhere.

Finally he arrived at the hill housing the school.

"Is she still at school...?"

As the area was pitch-black he obviously couldn't see any children around. The road illuminated by electric lights seemed to be enveloped in silence as if symbolizing the declining population of Shiou City.

Daisuke looked up at the school – and could see something sparkling on the rooftop.

"...?"

He rushed up the hill.

After making about two laps around the hill containing the school premises he reached in front of the school gate.

It was shut by the iron fence. Now that even the janitor wasn't there, the school was always shut down at an early time.

He couldn't see Chiharu on the other side of the fence.

Daisuke furrowed his brows, looking up the school enveloped in darkness.

"...!"

Another light was born on top of the rooftop across the playground.

Purple and blue lights clashed with one another, bursting.

The figure projected for an instant by those illuminating lights was that of Chiharu.

The one who faced her appeared to be a woman with long hair.

When the two lights clashed again he could clearly see Chiharu's face.

He could see blood trickling down her cheeks. He couldn't see it from there, but she appeared to also have wounds on her body.

The news he had watched at home just now rose to his mind – a news report about an elementary school student being attacked by a suspicious person.

"Chiharu!"

Daisuke started clambering up the railing without thinking, heading inside the school and running.

*

The smell of the rain that started raining at some point mixed in with a nostalgic smell.

The smell of his hometown.

Shiou City was probably unable to put a stop to its declining population. Daisuke felt as if the number of house lights illuminating the residential area diminished when compared to five years ago.

He came there by choosing narrow alleyways to avoid attention, but the number of people outside was so low it was unnecessary.

"Hah...! Hah...!"

Daisuke ran, his pitch-black coat fluttering.

He clearly remembered the road to school that he had used to take every day.

Even the traits of the road haven't changed in these five years.

Because of his bleeding wounds and fatigue he felt dizzy.

Yet he clenched his teeth and rushed through the residential road in a straight line.

Before long the silent hill road appeared in front of him.

The road leading up the hill was blocked by a rusty barricade.

On the barricade was a poster explaining that the elementary school on top of the hill was closed a few years ago and that at present civilians were forbidden to enter it as it was a state-owned land.

Daisuke kicked the barricade aside, rushing up the hill.

The electrical lights along the road perhaps had their power supply stopped as they were off. The grass around the guardrails was allowed to grow wild.

After about two laps Daisuke reached the elementary school. His alma mater he hadn't seen in five years seemed awfully small. Even though at the time he felt the school atop the hill was awfully wide.

Jumping over the railing blocking the main gate, he aimed for the school building. He knocked off the closed front door using his fist strengthened by fusing with his Mushi.

The destroyed door clashed with the shoe racks, rolling about splendidly.

"Hah...! Hah...!"

Just by him swinging his fist his body folded over violently. Leaning against the shoe rack to preserve his balance, he soon started running through the hallway.

He climbed the stairway that appeared in front of his eyes in one go.

"Hah...! Hah...!"

And—

Daisuke finally reached the place he aimed for.

Passing through the door in the fourth floor, that place was as silent as it was five years ago.

Repeatedly hit by the rain, Daisuke stood stock still.

Purple scales blew violently in his vision.

He felt as if he could see giant eyes inside the dark clouds covering the skies. That which showed its form for an instant was a far too massive swallowtail butterfly— "—What a lovely night..."

The incessantly pouring rain was repelled by a purple light at one spot.

"Even though you can't see the moon—"

A crimson long coat.

Round sunglasses.

And rainbow-colored eyes.

"Even though the starry sky is hidden—"

In the center of the glow repelling the rain was an inhuman, abnormal being.

"The incessant rain will wash everything clean..."

As if reciting a poem – as if intoxicated by her soliloquy, she narrowed her rainbow eyes.

"A fruit wet by the dew will no doubt be delicious, right Daisuke-chan?"

The pattern etched on Daisuke's body glowed green.

Unsheathing his handgun, filled with a flood of emotions, Daisuke mouthed the name of that being.

"I came here to defeat you... *Oogui!*"

Roaring, Daisuke pulled the trigger directed at *Oogui*.

3.00 Daisuke Part 5

Oogui didn't dodge the bullet Daisuke shot at her.

In front of her sleek smile purple scales converged and produced a circular mirror.

The moment after the bullet had been sucked into the mirror, an identical bullet with identical force was launched at Daisuke.

As he leapt aside to evade, the bullet blew up the ground on the rooftop at his back. The entire elementary school building shook and all the classes' windows shattered at once.

"OOOOOOH!"

Kicking the ground without a moment's delay, Daisuke closed his distance to *Oogui*. Circumventing around the mirror made of scales, he swung his fist aiming at her face.

"We Original Three appear when lured by delicious dreams..."

In front of his eyes the purple scales assembled and created a large Mushi. Daisuke's fist, leaving a green afterimage behind as it was swung downward, collided with the Mushi from the front as it raised a howl.

Having received a full-powered blow, the Mushi dispersed as if exploding. The shockwave gushing out created large cracks in the area around Daisuke and *Oogui*.

"We're everywhere and yet nowhere. But even so you knew that I would come here... You were the one and only person to know of my appearance here in the entire world."

Facing Daisuke with his full power, *Oogui* whispered as if dozing off to a dream. Without even looking at him, she kept gazing up the sky while letting his

attacks go past as if she was a sleepwalker. Her profile seemed like she was reminiscing about the past.

Small Mushi the size of a fist were created around her.

—All of the Mushi *Oogui* produced had no real form and were like an illusion given an outline by purple scales. Yet as the Mushi's ability was powerful it reflected his bullets, making him defend with his fist.

Daisuke promptly used his coat as a shield, jumping back.

The small Mushi scattered to all directions, emitting light. While radiating high temperature heat, they soared toward Daisuke. Having protected himself with his coat, the concrete at his feet was liquefied by the heat.

As *Oogui* moved while swaying about countless purple masses were born in front of her.

"Now I remember. On that day five years ago your dream seemed very delicious... But I was unable to eat it. It was quite regrettable. Facing you just after you became a Mushitsuki made me mutter some unnecessary words..."

The masses of scales flew toward Daisuke. They all became atypically-shaped Mushi, assaulting him while raising ghost-like cries.

Daisuke shook off the coat he had used as a shield and readied his handgun. The bullet shot from its muzzle blew off several Mushi together. Further rotating his body and repeating a kick, he pulverized the heads of two other Mushi.

"UOOOOH!"

The pattern of the Cleridae insect fused with Daisuke emitted a green glow. His fist exerting his full power smashed the remaining Mushi altogether.

"'If one day your sister... Ends up 'recalling' everything that's happened this day'—"

Yet there were too many Mushi. The ones he wasn't able to defeat stabbed their fangs into his body.

Daisuke's eyes perceived *Oogui*. Without minding the Mushi clinging to him, he charged toward the sunglasses-wearing woman.

"—'She will surely come to deliver me a delicious dream'."

Innumerable Mushi were produced above her. They spewed masses of flames or water from their widely opened mouthparts.

Receiving their attack from the front, Daisuke was blown back.

"Guh...!"

"You probably hadn't understood the meaning of my words at the time. — And you probably don't know what your sister 'remembered' even now. But even so, based on mere intuition..."

Bouncing on the ground, Daisuke's body clashed into the railings and was stopped. Because of the accumulated fatigue and the damage he had received until getting there his feet wouldn't move as he pleased them to.

Yet he mustered his power and stood up.

A large amount of blood was flowing from his forehead, dyeing the long coat around his body in deep red.

—"I remembered".

This was the short note Chiharu had left behind in Nishito City.

Just like *Oogui* said, Daisuke didn't know the meaning of her words.

However—

"If, just like I said, your sister comes to fully 'recall' that day... Then she would come back to this place just like five years ago."

The note Chiharu left behind made Daisuke run all the way there.

And he knew he had to hurry.

"That is why you've come, right? Before Chiharu-chan comes back here — before she fully recalls everything."

For the first time *Oogui*'s eyes looked at Daisuke from the front. Looking at him riddled with wounds, she raised an otherworldly ecstatic expression.

"But it's useless you know? Since your dream was snatched away from me five years ago, will you not let me have the best dream this time? Chiharu-

chan's dream... her feelings that slowly matured during these long five years—"

Oogui hugged her own body and shuddered. The woman, who was protected by enough Mushi to completely cover one's vision, licked her lips with a red tongue.

"I want to meet my brother and be convicted by him'... I will not hand over such a delicious dream to anyone."

Before Chiharu came back to Shiou City...

Before she returned to this place just like she did five years ago...

Daisuke had to defeat *Oogui* by his own hands.

Chiharu, the sister that ended up living separately from him five years ago. He didn't know where she was living now and what kind of girl she has become, all to protect his one and only sister.

He won't let her become a Mushitsuki.

Letting his carefree and good-natured sister shoulder the fate known as Mushitsuki would be too cruel— "...Convicted, you say?"

While tasting blood in his mouth, he exerted power to his hand holding the gun.

Oogui merely snickered. Even now that they faced each other atypically-shaped Mushi were being created around the woman one after another.

"What on earth are you saying Chiharu remembered—"

During that day five years ago...

Daisuke found Chiharu facing against *Oogui* in this place.

Yet his later memories were vague.

What remained in his ears was only the mysterious mutter *Oogui* repeated just now.

"Answer, *Oogui*...!"

Laughing in amusement, she again averted her eyes from Daisuke. She held up her arm toward empty space. As if – his young sister was there and she was

stroking her head.

"So you don't remember as well? Since at the time you had just turned into a Mushitsuki and ran wild it's understandable. You remember only the words I have muttered at the end..."

Daisuke's arm shuddered with a twitch.

"What are you... talking about?"

Oogui smiled, sending a side glance at Daisuke. While leaking a sweet-seeming sigh, she started speaking in a sugary voice that would melt one's reason just by listening to it.

"There were once two of the Original Three in this town you know? One was the blue cocoon wandering in search of paradise... He – no, was it a *she* at the time? You of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau call her *Sanbikime*, but her true name is Aria Vareii."

"...!"

"And the other one who keeps eating single-mindedly. The purple butterfly searching for delicious dreams to satisfy its appetite... You call me *Oogui*. —We two have fought over a very delicious dream in this town."

Oogui kept caressing the person who wasn't there. Daisuke felt a creep as if she was touching the nape of his neck.

"I have this body, but Aria isn't so. Since she possesses neither a personality nor a physical body, she requires a 'vessel'. And therefore she had chosen the person most close to that dream as her 'vessel'."

Ba bump—

Daisuke's heart pounded in his chest.

His heartbeat was rapidly picking up pace.

A bad premonition slowly crawled up from his legs.

"Yet while she had become one with Aria, the girl never tried to eat the dream in front of her eyes. On the contrary, she tried protecting it and stood in my way. And so we have fought to the death—"

The memories of the past flashed in Daisuke's mind.

He headed into inescapable battles just due to him being a Mushitsuki.

He met up with Haji Keigo, killed the Mushi of Anmoto Shiika who possessed the same dream by his own hands, had to separate from his friends, and saw the death of Tachibana Rina who loved him.

And even now he kept fighting.

"No... way..."

—Why had his days of fighting ever since becoming a Mushitsuki passed through his mind now?

Daisuke's instincts rejected the exposed answer.

"We have competed for a cute boy. A stray child who sought a place to belong to, a small boy..."

Oogui's rainbow-colored eyes narrowed enjoyably as she looked at Daisuke.

"—And you are much like a stray child even now, right Daisuke-chan?"

Until now—

From when he became a Mushitsuki and until now, how much pain had he endured?

How much had he experienced shaking in fear of his dream being eaten by his Mushi, of being cursed by other people, and of having the hope he was able to finally grasp slip out of his hands?

He was hurt, confused, lost – and yet kept fighting.

All because he was a Mushitsuki—

"And in the meanwhile what has that child who was once Aria's 'vessel' had been doing? Since she had finished her role she forgot all about her being a 'vessel' and about the dream she had eaten – that was the compensation for her being involved in Aria's sleep. That's the rule required for Aria to pass along to the next sleep. Until now there was no human to ever break that rule, but that girl alone appears to have recalled her memories."

The next thing coming to mind was the older girl who was always at his side

ever since the moment he was born.

And while she has seen Daisuke growing up she also grew up along with him.

She would worry for him and tag along.

Until she was separated from Daisuke five years ago she was always at his side.

"Now, will the girl who used to be Aria Varei's 'vessel' – Chiharu-chan really come back here?"

Kusuriya Chiharu.

Daisuke's one and only sister.

She, who was next to him ever since he was born, was Aria Varei— The originator behind his being a Mushitsuki.

"Can I ask you something, Daisuke-chan?"

Oogui smiled happily from the bottom of her heart.

"—If you are going to kill her, could you do it after I eat her dream?"

Burning fury filled his chest.

Is that so... is that really so—

He couldn't speak due his excessive rage. He even forgot that his archenemy was in front of his eyes and felt an urge to throw away his handgun on the floor.

He finally realized the reason for Chiharu having fought against *Oogui* five years ago.

On the road back from home that day...

Only now Daisuke realized why Chiharu showed him a sad expression for an instant just before parting with him.

I knew it... Even though I was supposed to understand the meaning of her catchphrase...!

Chiharu said the following before parting with him.

—I just got some dirt in my eyes. It's just that, really.

"It's just that, really" – these were the words Chiharu would always say when she lied.

"—I thought that I..."

Daisuke groaned unconsciously.

"I thought that I ended up being involved in battle because I became a Mushitsuki... That my battle started there..."

Only thinking about ending them, Daisuke never thought about when exactly had the despairing battles surrounding him started.

Without even thinking about it, he thought it happened ever since he became a Mushitsuki.

"But I was wrong—"

Daisuke raised his face.

He looked directly at the woman standing calmly in front of him.

She was one of the Original Three, *Oogui*—

"Even before that, you Original Three... have involved Chiharu since long ago."

Chiharu tried protecting Daisuke.

Obviously.

There was no way that brother-obsessed sister wouldn't try to protect him.

That was something that her one and only brother Daisuke knew better than anyone.

"And now you're trying to make her into a Mushitsuki as well, *Oogui*...!"

He couldn't lose.

Until now he went through countless mortal combats. Fights where defeat meant death.

But this time things wouldn't end with his death.

"...Ah, how nostalgic. Just like it was five years ago."

—She was probably stimulated by her gluttony.

Oogui sighed along with a bewitching smile.

"Five years ago Chiharu-chan made the exact same face as you do now."

A battle in order to protect someone.

Chiharu had already done that here five years ago—

"If you siblings try to protect each other... Then it would definitely be about the same delicious dream as back then."

The Mushi produced by *Oogui* all attacked Daisuke at once.

He offset the Mushi's attacks with his handgun, responding by using his fist to smash their heads apart.

Gunfire reverberated, and every time the pattern on Daisuke's body emitted a green glow several Mushi would be ripped to shreds, reverting back to purple scales.

But he was unable to protect against the too numerous Mushi, once again being flung to the ground.

Rain assaulted Daisuke's face as he collapsed face-up.

Through the cracks between the dark clouds one could catch a glimpse of a far too large purple-colored swallowtail butterfly. On the surface of its four wings, large enough to cover the entire town, was a pattern like human eyes. Purple scales emitting phosphorous light poured down from the butterfly in the sky.

Daisuke finally realized.

This was the power of the Original Three and the state of their existence.

Shinpu, who gave birth to Special Type Mushitsuki, possessed the absolute territory known as the Church. He had absolute power while inside there and he ate the dream of those he invited into his territory.

As for *Sanbikime* who gave birth to Fusion Type Mushitsuki, if *Oogui*'s words were the truth, then just like when Chiharu was the 'vessel', *Sanbikime* would merge with a specific person and thus become able to eat people's dreams.

And *Oogui*, who gave birth to Minion Type Mushitsuki, exhibited her abilities

through a separate activator – she needed the butterfly floating in the heavens. Since it was so big and so out of reach, it was impossible for Daisuke to attack that butterfly.

The Prototype Mushi who gave birth to Mushitsuki, the Original Three.

Prototype Mushi.

This truly was the form of the original Mushitsuki.

By noticing the similarities between the Original Three and Mushitsuki, Daisuke was once again convinced.

He felt as if he could see a ray of hope in the long fight.

If the Original Three resembled Mushitsuki, then it was likely that their weaknesses were also the same.

Meaning that if he could hit the activators of their abilities, their true bodies, then— —He could possibly win.

"Thinking you can win against me – have you come this far telling yourself that?"

While he was being hit by the rain on the cold floor, *Oogui's* voice entered Daisuke's ears.

"You should have known though... Only you, who knows of my ability, should be aware that you can't win against me as I am now, right?"

Oogui's sweet whisper didn't change in the slightest ever since the time Daisuke had come there. This bewitching voice that took away the reason of all listeners made fun of him putting his life at stake to battle her and played with him as if he was a toy.

"Despite knowing you can't win, you still had no choice but to come here..."

The air mixed with the rain's smell was unchanged from how it was five years ago.

It was the same smell of creeping despair from that time.

"You've shouldered everything by yourself and continually fought by yourself. Nothing's changed in these five years."

Mustering all of his remaining power, Daisuke roused his body.

While he was trying to stand up, the rain wetting his entire body mixed up with endlessly flowing fresh blood. The red stream was being absorbed into the drainage of the already closed elementary school's roof. The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's long coat he wore soaked up the rain and blood, changing colors.

"I'm different... from how I was five years ago..."

Standing up, Daisuke's face was dirtied by rain, blood and mud.

He raised his face and stared directly at *Oogui*.

"No, nothing's changed."

Gazing at the wounded Daisuke, she sneered at him.

"You're simply about to repeat the same from that day... from the time you turned into a Mushitsuki."

Purple scales were raining around the woman wrapped in a crimson-colored long coat.

These scales created countless masses in the air, transforming into atypically-shaped insects. The Mushi, crowding so densely as if to completely cover the field of vision, raised a yell that seemed like it would tear apart the rainclouds.

"When I rescued Senri I'd defeated *Shinpu*. —So I'll definitely beat you as well...!"

Daisuke raised his gun, pointing the muzzle fused with the jaw of the Cleridae insect toward *Oogui*.

He squeezed the trigger.

—*Clink*, a vain metallic sound echoed.

Facing Daisuke who had defeated *Shinpu*, *Oogui* gradually deepened her smile. She snickered suggestively while overlooking the townscape visible from the rooftop.

"It seems that the main dish has finally arrived."

"...!"

Daisuke widened his eyes.

He couldn't see anything in front of *Oogui*'s line of sight. But she was probably the only one who could sense a certain person approaching there.

I didn't make it in time—

He swept aside the sense of despair welling up in his heart.

No... I can still—

Throwing away his gun, Daisuke gathered up his remaining power. The green pattern covering his cheeks and fists emitted a bright light. The Cleridae insect assimilated with Daisuke handed out its power to him.

"I won't let you—"

He gazed at *Oogui* with his blood-dyed face, powerfully kicking the ground.

The green light tearing through the darkness of the night charged towards her.

"Oogui!!!"

The Mushi created around *Oogui* assaulted Daisuke. Some widened their mouthparts made of purple scales; others spread their wings and shot masses of flames and ice, lightning strikes or shockwaves.

Daisuke held his right fist aloft. The pattern etched to the fist exerting his full might shone in green.

His full-powered blow pounded the pursuing Mushi.

Annihilating the Mushi that were hit by it, the wave of the impact was yet to cease and so smashed the surrounding Mushi to smithereens. The school rooftop's floor caved in, wild cracks running through it. The energy created by the aftershock blew the metal fences away.

Daisuke raised his running speed, aiming directly for *Oogui*. The remaining Mushi all shot their attacks one after another, but he didn't stop. Several Mushi bit into him, but he pulled them along with him while shortening his distance to *Oogui*.

"Compared to back then – I became stronger."

Oogui was calmly sneering at Daisuke during his struggle through the curtain of Mushi.

He brandished his shining fist.

"—No matter how strong you've become, you can't defeat me... you should be aware of that, right?"

While *Oogui* smiled with enjoyment, a lone Mushi appeared in front of her.

Daisuke recognized the fake Mushi created by the purple scales – that Mushi which had a rear split into two.

This is Akatsuki's—

As he widened his eyes, Daisuke's vision was filled with countless laser beams.

The torrent of light shot toward the sky pierced him.

"...!"

Several beams shot at his stomach, shoulders and legs, penetrating the long coat provided by the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

Further laser beams were fired, vaporizing the violent rain.

Thrown into the sky, Daisuke was pierced by the heat rays again and again. Having already received irreversible injuries, he couldn't even evade.

By the vibration that came as a thud and the cold sensation touching his body he realized that he dropped on the ground.

He could also feel that along with the flowing blood his life was also spilling out.

He could hear his rapidly weakening heartbeats close to his ears.

"Please forget everything about both fighting and protecting... and sleep peacefully."

Oogui's voice sounded horribly distant.

She was facing him as he approached death—

But even so Daisuke tried standing up.

3.01 Chiharu Part 6

-

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Chiharu's peaceful days were being torn down.

She desperately resisted, reaching her hands to the happy daily life she was about to lose.

—At some point it started raining.

Although the sky had been clear until sunset, when it became night dark clouds suddenly obstructed the moonlight.

From within these clouds one could see four giant eyes overlooking Shiou City. It was a purple swallowtail butterfly so large it seemed to cover the entire night sky. Mixed with the rain were also phosphorescent scales pouring down.

Fighting on the rooftop of Shiou Elementary School, Chiharu breathed heavily and dropped to her knees.

"Hah! Hah!"

Chiharu's face, wet by the rain, was dyed in blood. Her clothes were torn and even from her hands fresh blood flowed.

"I won't let anyone... eat Daisuke's dream—"

Forgetting even the pain of her wounds, she rose up.

In front of her was one of the Original Three, Elviolene.

The woman called *Oogui* narrowed her rainbow-colored eyes. Around her the Mushi produced by assembled scales were wriggling.

"How cute you are to pretend to be tough. —You sure get along well with her, right Aria?"

"Give me a break. She's my worst partner so far. She's stubborn and won't listen to anything I say."

One of the Original Three Aria Vareii living inside Chiharu replied.

"But what a pity. Her body is too inexperienced so she can't endure your ability. Even her fighting style consists of her merely swinging around her arms."

"..."

The several dozen Mushi assaulted Chiharu.

She concentrated on the nerves in both her hands. Her blue-dyed hair swayed and her arms glowed.

She shook off her right arm to the side.

A blue glow swallowed the Mushi. The energy released by fusion with space without restoring it destroyed them one after another.

She stuck out her left arm.

The devastating energy torrent approached *Oogui* while destroying the ground.

Elviolene kept smiling without even evading. Her shoulders, her neck and part of her face were gouged out.

However—

"You seem to no longer have most of your power."

The raining scales became small Mushi that crawled over the woman's body, assembling at her lost parts. They transformed into flesh, bones and skin, mending Elviolene's body.

"Uuh...!"

The bones of Chiharu's arms creaked. Aria Vareii's fusion ability was not originally an offensive power. The attack that forcibly broke the power's balance created recoil that ate into Chiharu's body.

"I've told you, right? You can't beat El. If you want to destroy her you have to at least completely annihilate her body or it won't work."

Chiharu couldn't even speak against Aria's voice she heard in her ears. Her weariness and sharp pain made her almost lose her consciousness.

At this rate she would lose.

Chiharu would be killed and her brother Daisuke's dream would be eaten by Elviolene.

"A sister... protecting her brother is natural..."

Breathing heavily, she wore a smile.

"It's stupid how obsessed with your brother you are."

"It's not stupid. It's normal."

Death.

She found that idea so scary a shudder welled up inside her.

"...But I really might be a teeny tiny bit obsessed about him."

Chiharu said with a carefree smile like the usual.

Dying was scary. It was obvious.

But right now she had something she found much scarier than her death.

"I know. As I told you we're two hearts beating as one."

Aria's voice was slightly angry and seemed greatly resigned.

Still smiling, Chiharu rushed toward Elviolene. Crossing her arms in front of her head, she sprinted as if enveloping herself in the blue glow.

"I know perfectly well what you're thinking about now."

The Mushi protecting *Oogui* flew at Chiharu. But the moment they touched her running in a straight line they were annihilated by the blue glow.

As Chiharu closed the distance, Elviolene showed a calm expression without moving an inch.

Chiharu spread out her arms—

"You'd rather die than turn your little brother into a Mushitsuki."

"...!"

Hearing Aria's voice, Elviolene stopped smiling for the first time. With her crimson coat fluttering she moved backwards.

But it was too late.

As if tackling her, Chiharu wrapped both arms around Elviolene's waist.

"Sorry for involving you in my brother obsession, Aria."

The blue glow enveloped Chiharu and Elviolene.

"I'm the one who's involved you. Why do you even need to apologize?"

A large amount of Mushi were produced around Elviolene. But being touched by Chiharu's rapidly swelling power, they were scattered away all at once.

Dying was very scary.

Even now that she was going to annihilate Elviolene together with her, her trembling didn't cease.

—But turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki was much scarier.

Even if Chiharu wouldn't eat his dream, Elviolene probably would.

If so, then his sister could do only one thing for her brother's sake.

Even without Chiharu Daisuke would grow up splendidly.

Because he was a good boy who strong and kinder than anyone.

"...Bye-bye, Daisuke..."

She announced her farewell from her one and only brother.

Chiharu closed her eyelids—

"Not noticing this sweet smell must mean you are greatly exhausted, right Chiharu-chan?"

Elviolene's cheerful voice shook her eardrums.

"...!"

"...!"

Chiharu and Aria Varei inside her. Their awareness was turned toward the entrance to the rooftop.

The smell of the dream approaching them was—

"...Daisuke...!"

Chiharu grimaced. Although she had resolved her mind once, it now crumbled down.

In the end—

Just for a moment before she died—

"Chiharu...!"

"...I want to see... Daisuke's face..."

Her face wrinkled and tears flowed.

Having relaxed her mind, the blue glow enveloping the pair also rapidly subsided.

"You are two hearts in one body, right Aria? Then you should understand that no matter how much you sympathize with her, no matter how strong of a will she possesses... in the end she's nothing more than a child, right?"

Elviolene thrust Chiharu's body aside. Several Mushi rushed at her, using their claws to knock her off.

"Uh...!"

Rolling on the ground, she clashed into the railing. Although her regenerative abilities were enhanced through her fusion with Aria Varei, the intense pain caused her limbs to go numb for an instant.

"—Goodbye, Aria Varei."

But just after Elviolene launched her Mushi...

"Chiharu!"

The one to appear on the rooftop was none other than Daisuke.

Chiharu's one and only brother.

Daisuke—

For a moment she raised a weak smile.

But her expression immediately froze.

You can't—

The figure of her brother rushing toward her reflected in her eyes as if she was watching it in slow-motion.

The Mushi unleashed by *Oogui* were already approaching Chiharu.

Don't come here—

Her expression slowly distorted into despair.

You can't come here—

"__"

A spray of blood danced in Chiharu's vision.

•

Ayukawa Chiharu landed at the streets of Shiou City from the raining sky.

Right after releasing Chiharu from her embrace, Shirakashi Ubuki breathed heavily and collapsed on the ground.

"I brought you here... just like you told me, but...! Is that, no way..."

She looked up at the giant swallowtail butterfly that could be seen covering the hill and groaned.

"B-but, I'm already at my limits...! I'll fly again once I'm recovered a bit—"

She spent several hours flying at her top speed all the way from Ouka City. She had probably mustered every last bit of her stamina and mental power.

"Thank you, Ubuki-chan!"

She could never be thankful enough to her, but Chiharu had no time. She left Ubuki behind and rushed to the residential area.

"Ah... Chiharu-tan, wai—"

Ubuki tried hurriedly chasing after her, but her feet tangled and she tumbled.

Chiharu started running toward the hill she could see on the other side of the residential area.

The smell of the rain and the town's nostalgic smell.

Mixed with that, Chiharu who had once been Aria Vareï could perceive something.

A presence which could be called the lingering scent of Aria Vareï's existence.

And also—

"Elviolene...!"

She looked up at the giant swallowtail butterfly fluttering about inside the black clouds covering Shiou City.

Elviolene was there.

Chiharu could certainly feel the existence of one of the Original Three.

Reaching the hill, she passed the barricade and started climbing up the road.

A bad premonition squeezed her chest.

After reaching her alma mater, Chiharu gasped.

On the rooftop of the school building across the playground she could see purple scales pouring down.

Climbing over the railing, she ran towards the school. The front door had been destroyed. She passed through the shoe racks and ran in the corridors. She rushed up the dark stairs.

No way—

Chiharu reached the fourth floor and went through the door connected to the rooftop.

There's no way, right...?

Desperately shaking off the despair clinging to her, Chiharu went out to the roof.

•

Blood danced in Kusuriya Chiharu's vision.

"__"

As she widened her eyes to their limits, her brother's body fell on her with a thud.

As the Mushi were trying to assault her—

Her brother cut in between them—

And was torn apart—

"aaAAaaAAAAaAaHHH!!!"

A scream that didn't seem like it came from her reverberated on the school rooftop.

Her arms hugging Daisuke were dyed in lukewarm fresh blood. She desperately pressed down on the lacerations on her brother's back, but the abnormal bleeding wouldn't stop.

"I never thought he would end up using himself a shield without any hesitation – without faltering at all."

Chiharu couldn't even perceive Elviolene's voice.

"What a waste... the feast in front of my eyes is ruined."

"In the end, that's what happened? In the end I—"

Chiharu didn't even care about these words of the two Original Three.

While being pounded by the violent rain.

While simply embracing her still-bleeding brother.

She kept screaming.

•

Coming out to the rooftop, Ayukawa Chiharu's thoughts stopped for a second.

The rooftop of the closed Shiou Elementary School.

It was the exact same scene as five years ago.

In the midst of the violent rain a tall woman was standing.

She was clothed in a crimson long coat, had rainbow-colored pupils behind her round sunglasses, and wore a cheerful smile.

Elviolene. The being that was one of the Original Three and also had the name *Oogui* turned around to Chiharu.

"—Welcome back, Chiharu-chan."

Elviolene, looking completely unchanged from how she was five years ago, welcomed Chiharu with a joyful smile.

"Have you come to deliver me a delicious dream just like I thought?"

A single boy was collapsed in front of her. He was heavily wounded and didn't move.

"__"

She still wasn't able to restore her thinking, but Chiharu started running unconsciously.

In this scene that was unchanged from five years ago, only the boy's grown form indicated the passage of time.

First of all he had grown taller. When he was in elementary school he was about the same as Chiharu. But now his body grew more manlike, and he was probably taller than her.

His face also became slightly more masculine. His hairstyle was as plain as usual, but she thought his face became much more handsome than it used to be. He was definitely popular among the girls of his age. —Yet with blood streaming from his head, his eyes closed and his face pale he looked to be in horrible pain.

He wore the long coat provided to the members of the East Central Branch of

the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Under it was probably some school's uniform. Because of the deep red blood dyeing it she couldn't properly judge the shirt's original color.

Chiharu unhesitatingly shouted.

"—Daisukeee!"

She held up her one and only brother that lay on the ground without moving.

The large amount of lukewarm blood dyed Chiharu's clothes crimson in no time.

—Just like five years ago.

Her brother was rapidly losing his body heat in her arms— "—"

She could see the figure of her little brother approaching death both in her revived memories and even in reality.

Unable to endure the two merging consciousness, Chiharu screamed.

3.02 Chiharu Part 7

-

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Chiharu's happiness filled days – were about to be erased without any trace.

The striking rain created a stream mixed with the blood flowing from Daisuke's body.

There were only two people on the rooftop of Shiou Elementary School.

The unmoving Daisuke and Chiharu who held him.

And also two non-humans – Elviolene and Aria Varei.

"Daisuke! Daisuke! Daisukeeee!"

Why has this happened?

Inside the body of the elementary school 6th year student Chiharu was the mysterious being known as Aria Varei.

And at the same time the being known as Elviolene also appeared.

And both of them were after the sweet, delicious dream harbored by Daisuke.

"Daisuke! Daisuke!"

She had been resolved to fight in an attempt to stop them from turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki.

And yet—

Why has her brother in front of her, the one she was supposed to have protected— "Daisuke! Daisuke! No...! Open your eeeeyes...!"

Without understanding anything she could only shout.

The only thing she understood was that her one and only brother had gotten hurt instead of her.

"You said that you hate me...! You've called me annoying...! So why have you covered for me...!"

Inside Chiharu who could only cry and scream Aria Varej squeezed out a shaking voice.

"I'm so stupid...! Even though I knew it... Even though I knew these siblings aren't afraid of getting hurt even a single bit...!"

"I thought I would get it this time – but it turned out like this, Aria. Couldn't I have snatched away the dream you aimed for?"

Elviolene smiled no longer. She felt nothing at the fact she was about to lose Daisuke due to her fault.

"Daisuke! Daisuke!"

Daisuke's body in grew heavier in Chiharu's arms.

Flowing blood.

Her brother's body was losing its warmth.

"Chiharu! Chiharu!"

She couldn't think of anything due to her excessive fear.

Daisuke was losing his life right now.

No matter how much she called him, no matter how hard she hugged him, Daisuke's life was spilling out from between her arms.

It was fear incomparable to the time she was resolved to die herself.

"Aaah... Daisuke's... dying... he's dying..."

"Chiharu! Pull yourself together, Chiharu!"

"No... No... Daisuke..."

What had gone wrong?

When had she lost him?

—Gently swaying...

—Lightly floating...

Chiharu's world was supposed to be composed of pleasant days.

There wasn't supposed to be even a single thing that endangered her peaceful life.

"No... I don't want you to die... Daisukee..."

In that daily life Chiharu doted on her beloved brother.

Her brother that was a bit unsociable and so lonely.

Only Chiharu knew...

That Daisuke was in fact a good kid who was strong and kinder than anyone.

That was why only his sister thought of taking care of him.

She pampered him a lot and doted on him a lot.

All so that Daisuke – wouldn't be lonely.

"—Chiharu!"

"Ariaa... Daisuke's... Daisuke's... Ariaa..."

She wanted to keep spending such a daily life forever.

Even if the incomprehensible beings known as the Original Three were to disturb them, Chiharu wanted to protect him.

No matter how much she was hurt.

No matter how much she suffered.

She was going to protect her happy and peaceful days forever.

Even so, the center of those days which was her brother was slipping through her arms.

"...Let's eat Daisuke's dream, Chiharu."

Chiharu raised her tear-stained face.

Elviolene who was standing calmly returned her an ecstatic smile. —As if she was ascertaining Chiharu's suffering. As if Chiharu's choice was a condiment that stimulated her own appetite.

"—No... I can't... I just can't..."

Chiharu hugged Daisuke strongly.

Her brother was unmoving, and the intervals between his faintly felt heartbeats were growing farther.

Turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki...

It was the same as thrusting her one and only brother down to hell by her own hands.

She heard from Aria about the unimaginable lives lead by Fusion Type Mushitsuki so far.

Those who became Mushitsuki were hurt, fought, lost, and finally – reached a pitiful ending. Perhaps he would have his dream consumed and perish, or possibly just like Chiharu did to his friend Tsumura Mitsuki he would have his Mushi killed and end up as an emotionless Fallen— "I told you this before! When I, Aria Varej, give birth to Fusion Type Mushitsuki, the moment I eat their dream they're reborn once – it should be able to heal even those wounds!"

"No... Doing such a horrible thing... to Daisuke... I can't..."

Bump, bump, the heartbeats transmitted from Daisuke weakened.

Looking at the paling Daisuke, she grimaced.

At such a time—

While her cherished brother was breathing his last, at such a moment— Being merged with Aria Varej, Chiharu was attracted to him.

Daisuke's dream – seemed awfully delicious.

"Also, if I turn him into a Mushitsuki... I will..."

She bit her lips to suppress her urges.

If Chiharu abandoned herself to Aria Varej's appetite and ate Daisuke's dream he would be reborn as a Mushitsuki.

Then Aria Varei would leave Chiharu and she would forget everything about Daisuke.

That was the absolute rule for those involved in Aria Varei's sleep.

She would even forget that she had turned Daisuke – her one and only brother into a Mushitsuki.

"If I forget about Daisuke... who will I turn into...?"

Hugging her brother, she shed endless tears.

—*Bump, bump...*

She could clearly feel Daisuke's pulse.

"If I choose either of those... then I'll lose Daisuke anyway..."

"At this rate he'll die!"

Aria urged Chiharu.

Aria Varei, who became one with Chiharu.

Another Chiharu that had the exact same voice and personality.

That voice was also – crying.

"Even you should understand! There's no other way!"

"Turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki... and forgetting all about it... doing such a cruel thing... it's too cruel..."

Would she let her brother die without doing anything here?

Or would she thrust him to the life of a Mushitsuki where nothing but despair awaited him?

—It was far too cruel of a decision to make for Chiharu was still an elementary school student.

"Don't misunderstand, Chiharu...! Certainly he will suffer if he turns into a Mushitsuki! He will surely be hurt, lose many things, and yet still fight... and plenty of Mushitsuki also die! But they're all doing their best to live! They're living desperately while not giving up even if they become Mushitsuki!"

"No... I don't want to do that to Daisuke..."

"Even aware I will be begrudged and hated, I will say this as one of the Original Three that give birth to Mushi! All people who become Mushitsuki live desperately! As long as they're alive they'll be hurt, lose things, and yet they can still fight! All to see their dream continuing!"

—*Bump... bump...*

Her brother's heartbeats slowly grew more silent.

"Let's eat his dream, Chiharu!"

"I can't... Turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki... I would never..."

—*Bump... bump...*

Involving the kind Daisuke in the battle of Mushitsuki.

His sister Chiharu would throw him into days of battle by her own hands.

"Eat his dream, Chiharu!"

"No... No... NONONONONO!"

She shook her head, disheveling her hair.

—*Bump...*

Daisuke's heartbeats—

"Eat it!!!"

"NONONONONONONONOoooOOOO!!!"

—*Bump...*

Were growing weaker—

— . . .

And stopped.

"But he's your brother!!!"

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Chiharu's body was enveloped by a blue glow. Her blue hair stood up as if being fanned by the wind, and a surging stream of energy repelled the violent rain.

A golden light was flowing out of Daisuke in her embrace.

The light mixed with Chiharu's blue glow and began being absorbed into her open mouth.

Large tears started streaming from her eyes.

So sweet—

So rich in flavor—

What a painful dream—

The blue light enveloping Chiharu also started soaking into Daisuke in her embrace.

While crying, Chiharu stuffed her cheeks full of her brother's best dream.

Sorry, Daisuke—

While chewing the supreme taste that didn't seem part of this world, Chiharu could also feel something coming out of her.

I've done something terrible to you—

Chiharu was losing the being inside of her, Aria Vareï.

No, what's really terrible is that I'll end up forgetting I even did that— The memories of her precious brother were also vanishing along with Aria Vareï.

I think that you'll have a lot of difficulties from now on. You will fight a lot, get hurt a lot, and lose a lot. And all of that is my fault— "This is the best dream so far. Your brother will surely be strong."

She felt Aria's voice growing distant.

So—

Chiharu swallowed Daisuke's dream while wishing in her heart.

Gulp... rang from Chiharu's throat.

So you can hate me plenty. You can begrudge me plenty. Every time you suffer, think about me and— Being given Chiharu's blue glow, Daisuke was enveloped by a dull light.

"Even though I thought I finally found my safe haven..."

The next moment, a green light erupted from Daisuke's body.

The torrent of light mended his injuries.

An intense drowsiness assaulted Chiharu. A pleasant euphoria was making her eyes close.

I might forget about you, Daisuke... but I'll definitely recall it. I'll recall everything and find you. I'll go and see you again, my one and only brother. So when that happens, Daisuke— The green glow emitted from Daisuke broke through the sky.

Piercing through the black clouds, a single ray of light shone above him.

Swooping down from the light that connected Daisuke to the night sky was a small Mushi.

It was a green Cleridae with long feelers.

So when that happens, please kill me by your own hands— Since she turned her brother into a Mushitsuki by her own hands, she would have to atone for the sin of making him shoulder such a cruel fate.

That was the dream Chiharu harbored.

The only way she could atone for what she did to Daisuke.

"Good night, Chiharu."

As her body tipped over with irresistible drowsiness, in Chiharu's embrace—
"Let's meet again... is too embarrassing to say."

Daisuke slowly opened his eyes.

Chiharu smiled.

Thank god.

She could feel his pulse clearly. The most important was that her precious brother lived— "Good night, Daisuke—"

Eating her brother's dream and losing Aria Varej, Chiharu went back to being just Chiharu.

In her slowly closing vision, Daisuke silently stood up.

She could see her brother look down at her expressionlessly.

That was Chiharu's last memory of Daisuke from five years ago.

•

—She remembered everything.

During that day and in this place, on the rooftop of Shiou Elementary School, Chiharu had eaten Daisuke's dream.

And she turned him into a Mushitsuki.

Ever since that day she forgot about Daisuke and even about the dream inside of her.

"__"

Seeing Chiharu who recalled everything, *Oogui* – Elviolene – was jeering.

"Certainly... you have become stronger, right Daisuke-chan?"

In front of Chiharu's dumbfounded gaze, the boy stood up while fluttering his long coat.

It was the same as the scene she had seen just before losing her memories.

Daisuke stood in front of Chiharu while being pounded by the violent rain.

But Daisuke right now was much stronger than he used to be— "Dai...suke...?"

Looking down at Chiharu with calm eyes, Daisuke bore wounds all over his body. Even she couldn't understand how he was able to stand up in that condition.

"Daisuke...!"

Seeing her brother stand still, Chiharu immediately grimaced.

Thank god.

Five years passed ever since the day she had turned him into a Mushitsuki.

The most important thing was that her precious brother lived— "Daisukee..."

Her vision blurred due to her overflowing tears.

Although she wanted to see the figure of her grown brother much more she couldn't.

"—I've heard everything from *Oogui*."

Daisuke muttered toward Chiharu with his changed voice.

She bit her lips and nodded countless times. She couldn't speak.

Now that she's seen Daisuke she realized.

He had probably suffered much since becoming a Mushitsuki. He was hurt, lost a lot, and still kept fighting.

The one to make him shoulder that fate was Chiharu.

And she was finally able to recall that fact.

"Yes... I've turned you into a Mushitsuki... It's because of me you're so hurt..."

And it was now the time for her to be punished for that.

Chiharu was finally – able to meet with Daisuke.

"So, Daisuke... you can—"

Kill me—

She was about to say that but unconsciously swallowed her words.

Daisuke raised the edges of his lips just a slight bit. She needed only the shortest of moments to realize with her brain he was smiling.

He smiled at Chiharu only for an instant.

"This time I'll protect you, Chiharu."

She came to know the reason he came back to Shiou City.

She came to know the reason for him being covered in wounds.

It was all to protect her—

"...Daisuke—"

Chiharu could no longer see her brother dragging his feet walking toward Elviolene.

Even though she was the one to turn him into a Mushitsuki...

Even though she was the one to do such a horrible thing to him...

He was still trying to protect her.

"...You really are kind, strong—"

And a good kid—

Because of the sobs welling up from her she couldn't speak.

However, in contrast to all people who called him a demon, Chiharu was able to speak unashamedly.

Chiharu's one and only brother was a strong and good kid who was kinder than anyone— "Have you still not fought enough, Daisuke-chan? What can you even do by standing up again?"

"I'll... defeat you."

While *Oogui* was smiling calmly Daisuke spoke in a hoarse voice.

"—It's useless. You should be the one to realize it the most. No matter how strong you are... isn't it impossible to defeat me all alone?"

Chiharu reached her hand toward Daisuke.

You can't—

She tried raising a voice, but all that came out of her mouth were sobs.

Stop it already—

Finally able to move her mouth, Chiharu's hair was fanned by the wind.

She turned around after feeling the wind blowing away the rain.

"I—"

Chiharu's eyes reflected a large Mushi that resembled a rhinoceros beetle.

Countless human figures were riding atop the Mushi fluttering in the air with their wings spread. They were people wearing the long coat of the East Central Branch.

Other several Mushi filled the skies. There were an overwhelming number of

people clad in white, long coats.

These people were all turned into Mushitsuki and went through battle training.

—The Mushitsuki of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau filled the sky of the closed school.

4.00 Daisuke Part 6

-

Daisuke's sister Chiharu was collapsed on the school rooftop in front of him.

He recalled the details of his coming there through his muddy consciousness.

Daisuke was told by his mother to search for his sister that was yet to come home and so he went to the school – eventually finding her facing against an unknown woman on the roof.

Chiharu was wounded.

There were also objects that could only be described as monsters around the woman, and these assaulted Chiharu.

He promptly went to defend her.

He received the attack instead of Chiharu—

"Isn't it a lovely Mushi, Daisuke-chan? The Cleridae cries at dawn—"

The woman narrowed her rainbow-colored eyes and jeered.

"Will you also be able to cry someday?"

Daisuke looked at Chiharu collapsed at his feet.

She was wounded and unconscious.

He immediately realized who had hurt his one and only sister despite his currently hazy thought processes.

"—It seems like your memories are in disorder due to you just having turned into a Mushitsuki."

The Cleridae insect fluttering above his head transformed explosively. It

extended its tentacles and fused with Daisuke's body. On his bare arms and cheeks appeared a pattern shining in green.

"WOAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

A roar erupted out of Daisuke's mouth.

The next thing he knew he was holding the woman's head. The monsters around attacked him, but Daisuke didn't stop. Breaking through the railing, he fell from the height of the fourth floor to the ground.

Scattering the monsters' corpses, he pounded the woman on the ground. It greatly caved in, causing an earth tremor.

"So it's not mere disorder. —You're on a rampage."

The woman jeered regardless of the fact more than half of her head was buried in the ground.

—*She's not human.*

Feeling instinctive fear, Daisuke raised a beastlike war cry.

Grabbing the woman's head and arms, he kicked the ground as if jumping. While mowing down the trees around, he rushed down the hill like a heavy tank.

More monsters were created and they used their fangs or claws to carve lacerations on Daisuke's small body.

Breaking through a fence, he leapt to an old tire factory. A cramped mountain of old tires was piled up in the premises that used the foot of the hill.

As if wielding the woman, Daisuke flung her at the factory's wall. Pounded by superhuman strength, her body destroyed the concrete-made wall. Unable to withstand the impact, the building raised a roar as it crumbled down.

"...!"

As Daisuke breathed heavily purple scales started raining in his field of vision.

These scales assembled midair, forming monsters. They assaulted him immediately.

Daisuke desperately tried shaking off the monsters, but they were too

numerous. In an instant he became their prey and raised cries of pain.

"As expected of Aria's child. —But I longer have any reason to stay here."

The woman appeared from within the debris.

Her head that had long, spilling hair was smashed, the arm Daisuke had used to hold her was ripped from the shoulder, and her chest was scraped off to expose her bones.

But immediately after the scales enveloped the woman they turned into countless small insects that compensated for the missing parts of her body. In mere seconds the woman retrieved her beautiful appearance.

Spat out of a monster's mouthpart, Daisuke hit the ground.

"U...gh..."

The wounded boy couldn't move his body. He was losing his consciousness due to the excessive pain.

The woman waved her coat as she turned her back to him.

"—Oh, right."

While trying to leave with her footsteps loud, the woman stopped her feet.

"The dream your sister imagined for an instant just now... seemed very delicious."

Inside his dimming consciousness...

The woman's enjoyable monologue was burned into his eardrums.

"If one day your sister... ends up recalling everything that's happened this day... she will surely come to deliver me a delicious dream—"

The woman's voice including her smile remained in Daisuke's memories.

—That was what happened five years ago.

The day when Daisuke became a Mushitsuki and lost to the Original Three for the first time.

*

Five years ago, Oogui had said.

— *If one day your sister ends up recalling everything that's happened this day ... she will surely come to deliver me a delicious dream.*

These words were engraved in Daisuke's memories, yet he was unable to understand their meaning until recently.

Just the other day he came to know that Chiharu went missing at Nishito City's 'URBAN'.

His sister was supposed to live happily at some unknown place. He then came to know of the letter she had left behind before disappearing.

—"I remembered".

When that happened, the words of *Oogui* from the past connected to his sister inside him.

He didn't know what exactly she recalled, though.

Yet he was convinced.

Having Chiharu fully "remember" the happenings of that day five years ago meant without a doubt she would return to the same place. She would come back to Shiou City before long.

And the one waiting for her – was *Oogui*. One of the Original Three aiming to eat his sister's dream.

That was why Daisuke came there with no regards to anything.

To protect Chiharu.

To defeat *Oogui* before Chiharu came back.

Even if – he knew that he couldn't beat her as he was right now.

"Have you called some of your friends because you knew you couldn't win by yourself, Daisuke-chan?"

Fanned by a sudden gust, *Oogui* turned her rainbow-colored eyes to the wounded Daisuke. Even though the Mushitsuki revealed themselves in front of her, her smile was unchanged.

That's wrong—

Daisuke looked up at the Mushi surrounding them and grimaced.

—The Original Three made their appearance being lured by dreams.

Because of that it was impossible to designate where they would appear. No matter how much they wanted to defeat them, it was impossible since they didn't know their location.

But this time was different.

Daisuke knew about the place *Oogui* would appear at.

He knew since five years ago.

So he could have called them there.

But Daisuke hadn't made that decision.

Because—

"Stop—"

He shouted toward the members of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau while vomiting blood.

"The current SEPB isn't enough...! No matter how many you are—"

They probably came there to capture Daisuke who had run away from the SEPB.

Yet they saw the swallowtail butterfly filling up the sky and rushed there – they were surely surprised to see *Oogui* there. Almost all of the members felt fear as they've never experienced approaching *Oogui* as she prepared for battle.

A dignified voice rose from the members paralyzed with shock and fear.

"East Central Branch! Now that we've confirmed the appearance of *Oogui*, the orders from Acting Branch Director Goroumaru Touko have changed! The capturing mission of Blaze Class Rank 1 member *Kakkou* will be temporarily suspended—"

The one issuing orders was Ogata Akatsuki who stood on top of the large rhinoceros beetle. Even while assuming command of the East Central Branch his voice was unhesitant.

"The East Central Branch will use its full powers to annihilate *Oogui*!"

Being released from their paralysis by Akatsuki's voice, the members of the East Central Branch started moving at once. The members riding on top of the Mushi who could fly surrounded *Oogui*.

"Oi oi, I came here thinking *Kakkou*'s betrayed us but isn't there a much larger catch here! Seems like I'll be able to enjoy myself no matter who my opponent is! What'll we do, C!"

Another person riding on a Mushi raised her voice.

She was a blonde girl wearing a white long coat. She put a hand on the goggles covering her face and raised a delighted laughter.

"—Hah, isn't that different from the intentions of Central Headquarters? I thought you'd say so since it's you though! Hey you lot, pass along the change in tactics from the commander!"

The girl called *Kasuou* – the member that had once belonged to the East Central Branch, declared loudly toward the flying Mushi.

"*Kakkou* comes later! Kill *Oogui*!!!"

The members of Central Headquarters and the East Central Branch encircled *Oogui*.

"Fufu—"

Purple scales were raining from the night sky. *Oogui* intercepted the assaulting Mushi while smiling. An unprecedented number of Mushi was created in the air.

The first to jump off a flying Mushi was *Kasuou*. While in midair, she flung her own goggles at *Oogui*.

"Here ya go! First comes the greeting from our commander!"

Along with her coarse shout, the goggles she'd thrown emitted sparks for an instant. These white-bluish sparks momentarily transformed into a butterfly with the pattern of the letter C on its wings.

Central Headquarters member Secret Class Rank 2 C possessed the ability to

control electricity. It was probably her to call the SEPB members to Shiou City after failing to reach an agreement with Daisuke at the mountains.

The white-bluish butterfly flying out of the goggles soared to the sky through the rain.

"...!!!"

A white flash filled Daisuke's vision. The air shook and a large reverberation that made his stomach rumble enveloped the entire elementary school. The shockwave blew apart the railings on all directions.

The lightning strike pierced *Oogui*. About half of the Mushi created midair were evaporated. Full of the scent of scorched flesh, *Oogui*'s body became covered with burns.

"It's too early for ya to kick the bucket, *Oogui*!!!"

Raising a joyful war cry, *Kasuou* charged ahead. A black mist enveloped the girl, a part of it coagulating to form sharp claws. *Oogui* was forced to retreat by using her Mushi as a shield.

"So you're as lively as always, aren't you, *Kasuou*-chan?"

Although *Oogui*'s skin was burned, her euphoric-seeming smile was unchanged. A single Mushi clung to her body and the light emitted from the tips of its legs illuminated her. It was probably a healing ability as *Oogui*'s body touched by the light began to mend.

"...Don't move..."

Landing next to Daisuke was a long-haired person who wore the same white coat as *Kasuou*. She handed him his gun that fell on the ground and magazine she pulled out of her coat.

She was the Central Headquarters member Irregular Class Rank 3 *Nene*. As a beautiful singing voice came out of her opened mouth, the transparent figure of a cricket appeared to envelop Daisuke.

"...I can heal your wounds, but... I can't restore the blood and stamina you've lost until getting here..."

The wounds etched on Daisuke's body were being healed by *Nene*'s ability. —

If his wounds were left alone it would've been dangerous for him in a few minutes. Daisuke was barely able to hold on to his life.

While dropping on one knee he replaced his gun's magazine.

"...Kh... Why did you...?"

"Acting Branch Director Goroumaru Touko... told me it would possibly be necessary... She's currently cooperating with this area's SEPB branch head... They're telling the citizens around to not leave their houses..."

From the large rhinoceros beetle flying in the air – the Mushi of the East Central Branch's Blaze Class Rank 6 member *Kabuto*, a rain of laser beams was launched at *Oogui*.

It was Akatsuki. The heat rays shot from the mayfly at his feet covered for *Kasuou* who was fighting from close range by shooting down the surrounding Mushi.

"I don't really want to help *Kakkou*, but... since our opponent is *Oogui* that's another matter entirely!"

"ORAAA!!"

Cleaning up the swarming Mushi, the laser beams shot by Akatsuki and the claws unleashed by *Kasuou* were pressing in on *Oogui*.

With the two high-ranking members Akatsuki and *Kasuou* serving as the vanguard, other members joined the fight one after another.

The battle between the Mushi continuously created from scales and the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau began.

Daisuke shouted while withstanding his pain.

"No... Run away..."

But his voice didn't come out like he wanted it to, possibly due to his lungs being hurt. "*Kakkou*...?" *Nene* asked him with a puzzled face while healing him.

"Fufu—"

Swaying and moving around to evade attacks, *Oogui* was enveloped by purple scales.

Her form suddenly disappeared as if melting into air.

The laser beams and mist claws broke the empty ground.

"Kh!"

"Tch!"

While their two tongue clicking echoed, a calm girl's voice rose from atop the rhinoceros beetle.

"Searching for the coordinates of the ' ^{target} flame'. —Found it. Coordinates 16:8:-2, distance 18 in a straight line."

The girl holding hands with Akatsuki was Haji Senri. Since her ability was so wide-ranging she was still to be assigned a rank, but she was tentatively Irregular Class Rank 3.

Senri raised her index finger and thumb, pointing at empty space.

"Incinerating 'flame' exterior. —' ^{Shoot} Fire'."

A crimson pillar of flames erupted at a corner of the rooftop.

The scales turned into charcoal and were peeled off, exposing *Oogui's* form.

"Diorestoi's children sure are skillful—"

Akatsuki's lasers and *Kasuou* promptly assaulted her.

"You have nowhere to escape to, *Oogui*!"

"Go to hell!"

Oogui and the Mushitsuki's all-out war resumed.

The apparition-like Mushi with a dim outline crunched the Mushi of the combat personnel.

The Mushitsuki riding on top of the flying-type Mushi returned fire using special abilities.

The raining night sky was filled with Mushi's death throes and the exchange of abilities. The eyes of the massive swallowtail butterfly looked down at the Mushitsuki giving their utmost efforts to fight.

The morale of the members facing one of the Original Three was high. With

high-ranking members like Akatsuki and *Kasuou* at the front, they kept devoting attacks without considering their own damage.

One Mushi of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau fell down and then another.

Yet the protective wall of Mushi defending *Oogui* was also being cornered slow and steadily.

They might be able to defeat her—

Feeling this, the Mushitsuki increasingly accelerated their efforts. Gradually the death throes of Mushi created by *Oogui* and the Mushitsuki's war cries grew in numbers.

However—

Oogui's rainbow-colored eyes looked not at the soldiers in front of her eyes but at Daisuke.

"You can't defeat me – the only one to know this fact is you."

At the woman's feet a purple mayfly was created.

Daisuke widened his eyes. Although he wasn't fully healed yet, he shouted while spewing blood.

"...Get away from *Oogui*, *Kasuou*!!"

The next moment, a bundle of lasers was launched from *Oogui*.

The traces of light rained down at the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's members.

"Wha... this is my—"

Akatsuki's voice was drowned by the cries of pain coming from the rhinoceros beetle.

The overwhelming quantity of heat rays pierced Akatsuki, Senri, as well as the rhinoceros beetle ridden by *Kabuto*.

Losing its balance, the Mushi fell onto the rooftop with an explosive roar. Akatsuki promptly held up Senri and landed on the ground.

The lasers rained down even around Daisuke and the rest. He immediately leapt to cover for Chiharu and *Nene*, a ray beam grazing his cheeks and scorching his skin.

The other flying Mushi were the same.

Every time the light beams flashed in the night sky, the Mushitsuki were thrown away.

Although the members of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau were but one step away – all of them were blown away from *Oogui* in a second.

The one to receive the most damage was *Kasuou* who was fighting from close range. Shooting at the mist protecting her, the heat rays pierced the girl's body.

"Gaha...!"

She fell to her knees. When she coughed lumps of blood gushed out of her mouth.

Oogui calmly looked down at the blood-vomiting girl.

"Is this goodbye, *Kasuou*-chan?"

A simultaneous firing of laser beams was launched.

The gravely wounded *Kasuou* stared at *Oogui* with a demonic look.

"You... bitch... I'll kill..."

"*Kasuou*...!"

As Daisuke turned around a flying black shadow cut between the lasers in his vision.

It was Shirakashi Ubuki. She was a non-ranked member who ran away from Central Headquarters and a Fusion Type Mushitsuki like Daisuke. She made free use of the four black wings fused with her cloak, closing in on *Kasuou* while turning in sharp angles.

Just before *Kasuou* was caught by the lasers Ubuki's arms picked her up. Evading the killer blow only by a hairsbreadth, *Kasuou* was carried toward where Daisuke was and lowered down. *Nene* immediately started healing her.

"Why you... I'd rather be dead... than saved by you... *Karasu*...!"

"Wow, even when you're about to die you're not cute at all, *Kasuou*-tan."

Akatsuki, Senri, *Kabuto*, Ubuki, *Kasuou*, *Nene* – as well as the shocked Chiharu.

The high-ranking members ended up assembling around Daisuke.

Most of the other Mushitsuki also already fell to the ground. Some of them were on the rooftop but others were blown off all the way to outside the school.

And—

The laser beams shot at the night sky ceased.

"You were supposed to have known about my ability, right Daisuke-chan?"

The Mushi created by *Oogui* vanished into thin air.

The sounds of battle vanished and the school building was enveloped by silence.

The Mushitsuki were hurt and crawling on the ground.

Only one person, *Oogui*, remained standing on two legs.

"Rina-chan is no longer with us, but... there's another one, right? A cute child of mine—"

—The temperature suddenly dropped.

The silhouette-lacking Mushi were gone and the torrent of lasers was also gone.

At some point even the rain stopped.

What rained down from the heavens controlled by silence were small purple-colored fragments— —It was just like *Oogui* said.

Daisuke knew.

He knew about the biggest obstacle one needed to overcome in order to defeat her.

That was the power of the strongest Mushitsuki that once stood in the way of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau time and again.

"If you intend on settling matters with me, then is there not a child you have to bid farewell to first?"

Pouring down from the sky were fragments of snow—

Fake snow created by gathering the swallowtail butterfly's scales.

"The ability of your precious person will now serve to protect me you know?"

Oogui's voice that seemed as if it was singing symbolized the beginning of destruction.

4.01 Daisuke The Last

The rooftop of the elementary school collapsed with a rumble.

The instant the snow falling from the sky touched it, the concrete-made surface distorted as if it was paper, broke and crumbled down.

"...Kh!"

Daisuke immediately lifted Chiharu, jumping on top of the debris. Fusing with his Cleridae insect, he used his enhanced leg strength to evade the rushing rocks and fragments of snow.

Akatsuki also stretched out his body to protect Senri. Even while slipping off the surface broken into two he kept embracing her as he shot down the masses of concrete and snow with laser beams.

Kabuto was the one to protect the gravely wounded *Kasuou* and *Nene* who was healing her. Using his large rhinoceros as a shield against the debris, it flapped its wings to push back the falling snow.

Ubuki also weaved her way flying between the snowflakes, controlling two tentacles to cover up for other people.

The death throes of Mushi who couldn't oppose flew about the collapsing closed school.

The bodies of the Mushi who tried to escape the snow creating the destruction and yet still touched by it ruptured. Other Mushi were rolled up and crushed as if by an invisible hand, scattering their bodily fluids. Every time the Mushi lessened in numbers more members of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau collapsed.

"No way, can *Oogui* possibly... *use the abilities of all Minion Type Mushitsuki*...?"

Strenuously protecting himself, Akatsuki raised his voice.

Daisuke clenched his teeth.

Oogui's ability was being able to use the abilities of the Mushitsuki she had given birth to— Daisuke, who had fought *Oogui* time and again, knew of that fact. He had confirmed that fact several years ago – during the time he fought alongside a certain lance-wielding girl. But that girl was also not at his side right now.

"You were not able to tell about it to anyone until now, right Daisuke-chan? Although you knew about my ability you haven't revealed it to anyone..."

Using the wings of a Mushi perched on her shoulders, *Oogui* floated in air.

Still holding Chiharu, Daisuke aimed his handgun at *Oogui*. The bullet shot from the muzzle emitted vicious flames and pursued her in the air.

Yet before hitting it touched the purple snow, scattering apart as if exploding. Only a small gust fluttered *Oogui's* coat.

"It was because you knew that if the organization desperate to defeat me just like the East Central Branch will come to know of this, it might begin a hunt against Minion Type Mushitsuki..."

All people there gazed at Daisuke with shock.

"D-Daisuke?"

Even Chiharu looked up at him from his arms.

"That's why you were unable to do anything despite seeing me countless times, right? That's why you were unable to reveal my ability to anyone, right? You thought that if it becomes known that I give birth to Minion Type Mushitsuki and that they keep me alive... it would increasingly cause more fights between Mushitsuki—"

The pouring snow only increased in vigor. The school building was already about to lose all form and turn into nothing but ruins on the hill. Akatsuki desperately shot his lasers, evaporating the snow hailing above the heads of his comrades.

And yet members' Mushi were showered by snow fragments they were

unable to fully protect against and were being destroyed.

Although the combat personnel were aggressive until now, it all turned around in no-time.

The closed school became hell just by the ability of the Secret Class Rank 1 Mushitsuki *Fuyuhotaru*.

"It must have been vexing. You kept shouldering this all on your own and kept hesitating all on your own... But only you knew the fact it's impossible to destroy me—"

Daisuke exerted power to his hand gripping the handgun.

Each and every word of *Oogui* stabbed into his chest.

"No, you actually also know the only way to destroy me, right?"

While the destruction-producing snow was pouring down, she smiled cruelly.

"If you turn your precious Shiika-chan into a Fallen – or perhaps kill her, then even you alone should be able to destroy me."

The freezing, crushing blow smashed Daisuke's heart.

"Until now you have turned countless Mushitsuki into Fallens, and you have even let Rina-chan die, so does that mean only Shiika-chan is special?"

It kept snowing violently.

His comrade Mushitsuki desperately resisted the vortex of destruction.

However, in front of the unbelievable gap in destructive power, the Mushitsuki of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau lost their Mushi and became Fallen.

Shiika—

Shiika's reserved smile rose to Daisuke's mind as he bit his lips.

Should he destroy *Oogui* and stop the phenomenon giving birth to endless Mushitsuki?

Or should he just keep thinking he doesn't want to lose Shiika and challenge her even knowing he couldn't win?

Daisuke has yet to decide—

"You said you have defeated Diorestoi, but... that thing was nothing but a single fragment. As long as he has a medium he can split himself into several bodies—"

"...!"

Daisuke was shocked at this unexpected truth.

But the anxiety in his chest was affirmed by a certain understanding.

The fragments of Diorestoi—

He was suspicious ever since hearing those words from the disk handed to him by Ebina Yuu.

He was able to destroy Shinpu far too easily—

"It's not enough to defeat us Original Three, right Daisuke-chan? Neither your strength – nor your resolve."

The falling snow turned into a blizzard.

The vortex of destruction rushed toward Daisuke.

"...UOOOOOOO!"

Akatsuki howled. The full-powered laser beams he shot out annihilated each and every flake.

Yet the snow was too fierce.

It slipped through the torrent of laser beam and changed the terrain.

"Incinerating the ability's ' ^{target} flame'. — ' ^{Shoot} Fire'!"

Senri pointed to the front, raising her voice. The falling snow was evaporated midair.

""Fire!' 'Fire'!"

She raised two fingers, then three fingers, finally intercepting the blizzard with her palm fully open. Pillars of flames appeared one after another, swallowing the shards of snow.

Even the pair's powers were not enough to bring the overwhelming

destructive power of the blizzard under control.

The snow slipping through the gaps of attacks was knocked off by a mass of concrete thrown vigorously from the back.

"UORAAA!"

Even while vomiting blood, *Kasuou* used the claws made of solidified mist to skewer pieces of debris and throw them at Oogui one after another. "*Kasuou*...! You're not fully healed yet..." *Nene* tried to restrain her, but she didn't seem about to stop. She kept flinging the debris supplied to her by Ubuki.

"Kuh...!"

Kabuto was also desperately trying to blow off the snow using the wings of his wounded rhinoceros beetle. A large amount of bodily fluids spurt from the body of his Mushi that had been hit by the earlier lasers.

The mixed combat personnel of Central Headquarters and the East Central Branch were desperately trying to protect themselves. Even while they were hurt and one person fell after another, they all resisted the destructive power of the snow without giving up.

"*Fufu*... I can finally have my meal."

Oogui's rainbow-colored eyes watched a single girl through her round sunglasses.

They went through Akatsuki and the rest who were desperately facing off against her.

They went through Daisuke who stood still.

—And the rainbow-colored eyes perceived Ayukawa Chiharu.

"...!"

Chiharu's shoulders twitched in Daisuke's arms.

She raised her face slowly as if enthralled by the rainbow-colored eyes.

"Chiharu!"

Even Daisuke's voice didn't reach her ears. She stuck out both hands and separated herself from him.

"You have recalled your dream from five years ago, right? You came back to this town because of that, right, Chiharu-chan?"

The large swallowtail butterfly covering the night sky flapped its wings. The blizzard increasingly grew in intensity.

Chiharu's wet eyes looked at Daisuke.

"Daisuke..."

Behind his sister's back, inside the purple blizzard, *Oogui* made an ecstatic smile.

"So, Chiharu-chan. Will you tell me your dream?"

Don't do it, Chiharu—

Daisuke wanted to tell her, but no words came out.

Chiharu's sorrowful eyes made him freeze in place. Her regret at failing to protect him five years ago and her sense of guilt for causing him to suffer even now made large tears flow out of her eyes.

"I wasn't able to protect you... I did my best but I failed – and turned you into a Mushitsuki."

Grimacing while she seemed liable to start wailing at any moment, Chiharu let out a hoarse voice.

"Even though I'm your older sister... Even though I knew that once you become a Mushitsuki you'll definitely suffer... Sorry, Daisuke—"

Each and every of her words stabbed Daisuke. What had Chiharu felt when she was trying to protect him five years ago – and how much had she regretted being unable to do so?

The voice she was wringing out expressed these feelings.

"Even now you're so wounded... and you suffer like that, and all of it – is my fault."

Bump, his heart throbbed.

Even the agony he felt right now, anything and everything— Was brought by the cruel fate he shouldered as a Mushitsuki.

"..."

Daisuke slowly raised his arm grasping the handgun.

He directed its muzzle at his one and only sister Chiharu.

A bullet was rotating rapidly inside the muzzle fused with the jaw of the Cleridae insect. The flames born from the frictional heat burned the snow around.

Having the gun pointed at her, Chiharu made a relieved smile.

"And so I thought when I turned you into a Mushitsuki—"

The pattern of the Cleridae insect fused with Daisuke rustled.

Eating his dream whole, the Mushi's power derived from it converged inside the handgun.

—Why was he a Mushitsuki?

He thought about this not once or twice.

He was made a Mushitsuki without his knowledge and thrust into battles he didn't want to participate in.

Why did only he have to be so hurt? Why did he have to fight so much? Why did he have to lose so much?

There were times he was unable to sleep because of the hatred messing up his mind.

There were times he succumbed to his urges to destroy everything because of his murderous impulse towards the one who made him thus.

And the one behind turning Daisuke into a Mushitsuki was right before his eyes— Chiharu appealed to Daisuke.

"I knew that after turning you into a Mushitsuki, when I meet you again... You would ki—"

"There were times when I thought I was better off dead."

Daisuke said, interrupting his sister's words.

Every time the pattern covering Daisuke's body increased its glow, something

important was shaved off the depths of his chest.

"There were many times I thought about how painful battles were, how my wounded body was aching, and how tired I am of losing things... and about why I'm trying to live so desperately."

The opponents he had fought so far rose to his mind.

At times they were unknown Mushitsuki, at times they were Mushibane, and at times they were his supposed comrades of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

What dropped from his wounded arms brought back memories.

He made Anmoto Shiika, a Mushitsuki who harbored the same dream, into a Fallen by his own hands.

There were also times where Daisuke was estranged from people who thought of him as their friend and let them lose their lives without saving them.

He saw Tachibana Rina lose to her Mushi and breathe her last in front of his eyes.

"There were many times I gave up thinking it's all because of me being a Mushitsuki. There were also times I thought of stopping in place thinking it's the fault of the one who turned me into a Mushitsuki."

The eyes of the Cleridae insect that was fully fused with Daisuke's readied gun were dyed blood-red. Eating Daisuke's dream, it embedded its powers to the bullet rotating inside its mouthpart.

"—But that's wrong."

Chiharu made a surprised face in front of him.

Daisuke was smiling.

"I found someone important to me, Chiharu."

What *Oogui* said was completely right.

Anmoto Shiika, the girl who was made a Fallen by Daisuke's hands and then revived again.

They both reunited not as Mushitsuki but as Kusuriya Daisuke and Anmoto

Shiika. They met normally and spoke about their dreams. Even now he couldn't forget the warmth that came from holding her hand.

He wanted to meet up with Shiika again.

He wanted them to reunite not as *Kakkou* and *Fuyuhotaru*, but just like before, as a normal boy and girl.

Shiika was someone special to Daisuke.

And it wasn't just her—

"I haven't simply fought, gotten hurt and lost many things. I fought by my own will. To make my dream come true."

The pain engraved to Daisuke brought not only suffering.

And it didn't mean that the people who've left him were erased of his memories.

All of them left something important inside him.

"If you hadn't protected me five years ago... I would've been unable to be hurt, to fight, to lose. And my dream would've ended right there."

He loaded his handgun with all of the feelings he received since becoming a Mushitsuki.

He switched his aim from Chiharu – to behind his sister, to the jeering *Oogui*.

"It's not your fault, Chiharu. Thanks to you I'm now able to see the continuation of my dream."



He then spoke clearly.

"Thank you, Chiharu. Thank you for protecting me."

—The raging tempest slackened its intensity.

In Daisuke's line of sight Chiharu and *Oogui* changed their expression contrastively.

Oogui erased her joyful smile—

And Chiharu—

"—Yeah."

Still shedding tears, she smiled radiantly.

"Since I'm your sister it's obvious."

Turning around, Chiharu spoke proudly toward *Oogui*.

"See? My brother is a strong, good kid who's kinder than anyone."

Oogui slightly grimaced.

"—My dream's already fulfilled. Because Daisuke forgave me."

The silhouette of the swallowtail butterfly covering the night sky distorted. Cracks appeared in the large eyes on its wings.

The blizzard of scales lost power.

Being "rejected" by the owner of a dream...

That was the biggest weakness of the Original Three—

—The air vibrated.

The bullet gathering Daisuke's whole might and dream was ejected out of the Cleridae insect's jaw.

Tearing through ground, breaking through the curtain of falling snow, the flame-wreathed bullet hit *Oogui* squarely.

"...!"

Her body was covered in sprays of blood. Her right arm smashed by the bullet and the flesh starting from her shoulder to her chest was gouged out. Her

rainbow-colored eyes were open wide.

The blizzard ceased.

The massive swallowtail butterfly in the sky was starting to disappear into the black clouds.

Among the Mushitsuki who raised their heads expectantly, only Daisuke alone grimaced.

"Is it... still not enough...!"

The bullet shot by Daisuke.

It was originally supposed to possess enough power to annihilate *Oogui*, but wasn't able to fully repel *Fuyuhotaru*'s snow. It had lost much of its power before hitting her.

The rainbow-colored eyes glared at Daisuke gritting his teeth.

"How many times will you interrupt my meals, Daisuke-chan?"

With strings of blood dribbling from the corners of her mouth, *Oogui* made a twisted smile.

"—As expected you have become somewhat of an eyesore."

Daisuke's knees folded and he fell on the ground.

"Daisuke!"

Chiharu hurriedly rushed at him. Losing his grip strength, the handgun slipped from his hand.

"If you once again stand in my way the next time – then I'll not go easy on you, you know?"

Showing him an expression she had never made before, *Oogui*'s body was enveloped by a purple mist. Starting from her legs upwards her form was vanishing into the starry sky.

Akatsuki and *Kasuou* prepared to stop her from escaping.

However—

"Incinerating... 'Flame's' exterior—"

"Senri!"

While trying to point at *Oogui*, Senri's arm lost its strength and slumped down.

It was probably due her overusing a power she wasn't used to. Akatsuki supported Senri who was exhausted and covered in large beads of sweat.

Until the very last moment *Oogui* completely disappeared, the rainbow-colored eyes stared at Daisuke.

She was gone and Daisuke hanged his head.

"Daisuke...! Daisuke...!"

As he raised his face, Chiharu supported his shoulder.

He was finally able to look at the face of the sister he had been reunited with after five long years from up close for the first time.

Different from how she was during the time of elementary school, he thought that she grew taller and even her face looked more adult-like.

Yet seeing her worry for him and cause a commotion was completely unchanged from that time.

"...I'm fine... You're a worrywart as always..."

Seeing Daisuke putting a brave front, Chiharu smiled while crying.

—When he opens his eyes a new battle would begin.

He would keep fighting by his own will.

He would keep getting hurt while spending his days on nothing but fighting.

So for now—

"I'm not a worrywart. It's normal."

Chiharu said in a carefree tone just like five years ago.

Only now—

Enveloped by a nostalgic warmth, Daisuke surrendered himself to pleasant sleep.

4.02 Chiharu The Last

*

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Chiharu's tranquil and happy daily life was unchanged.

And what pushed the carefree and peaceful Chiharu into this warm world was — "Uh..."

Kusuriya Chiharu roused her body with a groan.

She, who had lost her consciousness on the dark and desolate rooftop, was covered in wounds. She was also completely drenched due to the rain and blood. In contrast to the amount of blood covering her clothes all of her wounds were shallow.

"..."

Chiharu rose up, absentmindedly looking around her.

In the space shrouded by darkness she couldn't see any other human figures.

Her head felt muddy.

She couldn't recall why she was there and why the school was this tattered.

"—I need to go back..."

Mumbling, she started walking with a staggering gait.

If she walked around this late she would make her mother worried. She had nothing in her head but this.

Something pulled at Chiharu's shoulder as she tried to leave the roof.

Perhaps it was her other self that was supposed to be inside her.

Or the sorrowful dream she had harbored for an instant.

Or the person more important than everything, her one and only— "...?"

When Chiharu turned around there was no one behind her.

Thinking it was her imagination, she started walking again.

And just like this—

She left various feelings and thoughts at this place.

Kusuriya Chiharu left Shiou Elementary School.

*

She wouldn't let go.

Even after *Oogui* – Elviolene had left, Ayukawa Chiharu didn't let go of her hugged brother.

Different from how she left this place alone five years ago.

Chiharu came back there and retrieved what she left behind at the time.

"Daisuke..."

With her tearing eyes she confirmed the existence of her brother with his eyes closed in her arms.

She could feel a strong pulse from the wounded Daisuke.

Raising her face, she could see the group of Mushitsuki riddled with wounds looking at her and Daisuke. The people wearing black and white coats watched over the reunion of brother and sister calmly.

These Mushitsuki all went through cruel battles until now, and they would keep fighting from now on.

Just like her little brother Daisuke.

Since she recalled everything, Chiharu couldn't run away from their battle.

—I found someone important to me, Chiharu.

Thus said her brother.

And she heard who it was from Elviolene.

Anmoto Shiika.

The girl in the center of the fight between Mushitsuki, *Fuyuhotaru*.

Was Shiika fighting also under this sky even now? Would she, who was trying to fight against fighting, also keep living to meet Daisuke again?

If these two met and ended up needing each other— Then Chiharu would never regret the fact she had turned her brother into a Mushitsuki in order to save his life.

Hugging Daisuke's head, she closed her eyes.

Inside her arms she could clearly feel the warmth of the brother she had met by chance.

"—Aria..."

Keeping both eyes closed, Chiharu spoke.

Now that she had reunited with her brother, there was another person she had to search for.

Just like Daisuke wished to meet Shiika.

Chiharu also had someone she made a promise with.

"I can feel your scent... Even now you're still wandering somewhere."

One of the Original Three – Aria Vareï.

Having fully retrieved her memories, Chiharu also recalled Aria Vareï's scent. She could feel it from somewhere far away.

Konomura Chami had told her.

If she could expose the mysteries of Mushi she would be able to end the fight of Mushitsuki.

And Aria Vareï would know about them—

"I'm coming for you."

—*Yeah, that's right. You can stay inside me... forever.*

In order to fulfill her past promise...

In order to ascertain the battle of Mushitsuki...

Chiharu would find Aria Varej.

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Chiharu felt that such a peaceful and happy life— Was surely waiting for her in the future.

4.03 The Others

In the underground of Akamaki City was the base of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's Central Headquarters.

Reaching to the depths of dozens of meters below ground, in the deepest part of a certain facility in the eighth layer.

A room lined up with monitors and control boards was enveloped in shrieks.

Certain objects were destroying the equipment, slicing up the people wearing white coats running about and defeating the combat personnel sent to stop them.

They were a swarm of disks covered by a shining pattern that flew in the air.

The one controlling these disks was a boy with black lines drawn under his eye.

"[Rin is confused]! [Rin is confused]!"

Every time he yelled frantically with a pale face, the disks flew around the room. The lights were destroyed by the disks slicing up the ceiling, so the room was shrouded in darkness. A shrill alarm resounded.

Soon the emergency lighting went on and the room was illuminated by white-bluish lights.

By the time the lights have returned, the eyeliner-wearing boy could see a woman standing in front of him.

This suit-wearing woman didn't even move an inch when faced with the boy's abnormal destructive actions. She calmly looked at him with narrowed eyes and wore a thin smile.

"...!"

Seeing the woman smiling under the emergency lights, the shoulders of the

eyeliner boy twitched. He became frozen stiff with an expression of fear as if the woman's smile was an invisible chain.

"—So you have lost your normal thinking ability, Rin. I believe you are under the effect of an enemy's attack."

Showing him her chaining smile, the woman – Miguruma Yaeko – spoke in a calm tone.

People wearing black masks gathered around her.

The boy raised a small shriek inside his mouth. He reflexively controlled his disks and tried to attack Yaeko.

"Ri... [Rin is confused]! [Rin is confused]!"

The black masks promptly defended her. Yet the eyeliner boy's attack was faster than all of them. Slipping between the materializing Mushi, it aimed for Yaeko's brows.

Just before the sharp blades of the disks tore her to shreds...

Crimson flames filled her sight.

A roaring Manticora latipennis evaporated the disks, also swallowing up the Mushi protecting Yaeko as if saying it wasn't enough.

Burning all the disks to a crisp, annihilating all Mushi, the Manticora latipennis burst and disappeared.

Not budging an inch, Yaeko could see the eyeliner boy bending backward.

His eyes that were rapidly losing their light gazed at her. He muttered as if talking in delirium.

"Re... 'Remember this'..."

Leaving that word behind, the boy collapsed on the floor with a thud.

Starting with that boy, the black masks surrounding Yaeko also fell down listlessly.

"Please make a bit of an effort to restrain your power, Harukiyo."

Yaeko's smile was unperturbed in the slightest. Despite the fact she was a

single second away from losing her life, she moved not an inch from where she stood at first.

In front of her was a strangely-dressed boy.

The boy's face was fully covered by tape. Sitting on the desk he rested his chin on his knees, smiling. It was a fierce smile that would make anyone feel goosebumps were they not Yaeko.

Irregular Class Rank 1, Harukiyo.

He was one of the Mushitsuki possessing the strongest battle power just like *Kakkou* or *Fuyuhotaru*.

"Remember this' – is what he said. Aren't those words too late?"

"This is probably something like a war declaration from someone. He had apparently just finished his mission, was finished off by some small fry and returned. However—"

Wearing her chaining smile, Yaeko looked down at the collapsed boy.

"I am interested in that ability. If I ever end up meeting with it then I will make use of it."

The black masks that arrived too late stopped as they saw Yaeko and Harukiyo. They stood in place as if fearing these two smiling at each other.

Yaeko looked around the destroyed room.

"Urgently check the security of the bottommost layer, please. Raise the alertness level to the maximum."

Following her orders, the black masks immediately started moving.

"I thought that *Kakkou* taking independent action was far too convenient. But there is someone who gave him that opportunity. Who on earth was that?"

Yaeko turned her smile toward Harukiyo.

Kuku, laughed the boy whose face was covered by tape.

"Leaving you at my side was apparently the right call. Your comrades are probably heading down the lowest layer about now, right? Or perhaps – if things went well, you would have joined forces with *Kakkou* and tried to defeat

the Original Three?"

"What're you talking about?"

Keeping his chin on his knees, Harukiyo raised the edges of his lips.

Yaeko and Harukiyo crossed their gazes.

"What a pity. You still do not know the precise whereabouts of 'that', and *Kakkou* himself cannot beat *Oogui* alone."

Harukiyo erased his smile. His searing eyes penetrated Yaeko. She received that gaze which seemed like it would burn her from the front with her chaining smile.

"All is well. So you intend to keep trying to outsmart me, Harukiyo."

Yaeko walked around the room illuminated by the emergency lighting.

Within the blaring alarms she passed in front of Harukiyo with an air of composure.

"Even when you stubbornly refuse to obey the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau – I will still love you."

The chaining smile stood out in the space illuminated by the emergency lights.

Closed and Beginning

Gently swaying...

Lightly floating...

Kusuriya Chiharu's peaceful life was the sort of happy daily life that could be found anywhere.

While cleaning up the apartment she lived in, she hummed a song in her usual easygoing manner.

She wiped the floor using a dust cloth embedded with her gratitude for receiving care for all these years.

"There, cleaning done!"

In front of Chiharu's smile all furniture and electrical appliances were gone. They were all already disposed of.

—She was about to leave Shiou City today.

She knew life was hard, but they ended up needing to move out of the apartment. Counting on her mother's classmate from the past, Chiharu was moving to a new town.

She felt bad separating from her friends, and there was also some anxiety at starting a new life somewhere unfamiliar.

On the other hand, she felt uplifted as if heading out on a journey. After all it was her, who lacked sense of danger to the extent she was often called a risky child. Even in her new life she would probably be able to carry on carefreely just like she did until now.

"And... that's it."

Since they became wet due to her wringing out the dust cloth, she removed her bandages.

It was three days ago that Chiharu had been injured and tottered back home late at night.

When she came back her mother supposedly spoke to her about a lot of things, but her memories from that time were vague. She didn't even know how she had gotten hurt. But she could remember that the more they spoke the more her mother paled with surprise.

Ever since then Chiharu didn't go to school. Her mother usually wouldn't interfere, but for some reason she became terribly worried. Even though her wounds weren't serious she treated her like an actual patient.

—Do you really not remember...?

Even this morning she was asked this once. Not understanding what she meant, Chiharu shook her head.

That was all.

Her mother was speaking with the landlady at the entrance.

"—We got contact from that Special Environmental Preservation Bureau place —Daisuke's going to—"

They seemed to be deep in talk. Even though they had to leave, the landlady was kind to the last. Her mother was probably thanking her.

The phone rang.

Only the phone originally installed in the room was left as it was.

"Yes, this is the Kusuriya house."

When Chiharu answered the phone, the other side presented themselves as the city hospital.

With a businesslike tone she was told about someone finally opening his eyes and about them finding this address from that person. Chiharu spoke before fully hearing the man's story.

"No, we do not have any person called Daisuke here."

It was the wrong number. Although the other person sounded puzzled, they apologized and hanged up.

"Chiharu. Who was that?"

"It was apparently the wrong number."

"I see..."

Her mother sighed.

When it became afternoon Chiharu and her mother left the house holding hands.

Carrying just the minimal amount of luggage, they left the apartment.

—It's fine if you don't remember.

She heard a voice from somewhere.

Feeling as if she had forgotten something, Chiharu turned around.

She could see a figure in the room she lived in.

And it was—

A boy Chiharu didn't know.

"What's wrong, Chiharu?"

"No, it's nothing."

Shaking her head, she left Shiou City along with her mother.

It was probably some kid from the neighborhood that got in the empty room as a joke. So she thought.

Since she hated making people worried, she didn't tell her mother.

For just an instant – the depth of her chest hurt horribly.

*

He was thrown away.

He didn't need much time to realize this.

He knew his mother was exhausted of work. He hated being a burden.

And—

Chiharu turned around to Daisuke who stood inside the vacant apartment.

She tilted her head and then averted her eyes.

As if seeing a complete stranger.

"..."

As Daisuke lightly bit his lips, a Cleridae insect perched on his shoulder.

He exited the apartment and went down the stairs.

But his destination was not his mother and Chiharu.

Now that he wasn't needed even by his sister, Daisuke had no place he belonged to.

He kept walking around without even knowing where.

When night came Daisuke was inside some unknown park.

Sitting on the swing, he used a toy gun someone had left behind to shoot empty cans.

He had to become stronger from now on—

Strong enough to live by himself.

He resolved in his heart to never cry.

Yet he had no idea how he was supposed to live.

For the young Daisuke, the reality that he had no place was helplessly hopeless— "Just as I wondered where you'd gone after sneaking away from the hospital... great."

He heard a voice from nearby.

Rubbing his nose, Daisuke wiped his face with his sleeve. He looked toward where the voice came from, squinting.

A suit-wearing youth was standing under an electric light.

"Also, what a strange insect you have there."

Seeing the green Cleridae insect perched on Daisuke's shoulder, the youth raised a thin smile. It was an awfully cynical and superficial smile.



"Who're you?"

Faced with Daisuke who squinted while inquiring this, the youth deepened his thin smile.

"Haji Keigo."

It was a meeting with a single man.

And—

The beginning of Daisuke's battle.

Afterword

Hello, this is Iwai Kyouhei.

At last "Mushi Uta" too reached its fifth volume.

Isn't this pace of publishing five volumes after about two years since starting the series a bit slow when compared to other works? I have the feeling that it's below the average writing speed of the lately increasing numbers of light novel authors. How scary.

But during these two years the "Mushi Uta Bug" series that could be called a side story was serialized in the magazine The Sneaker, so I was able to expand laterally. And at almost the same time this book is published my first special feature cramming both "Mushi Uta" and "Mushi Uta Bug" came in The Sneaker. This is my undeserved big moment.

Even as a complete newbie who nervously started his debut with Mushi Uta I will continue like this. With this work that connects to the story I want to reflect on the thanks received from the readers.

Just like the other volumes, I will briefly discuss the making of this one.

About the story.

In contrast to until now where I would suddenly change characters and wrap up the story in a single volume, this time the story developed straight from the ending of the previous one. It's in the form of solving the mysteries raised last time.

Speaking honestly, this is my first time to write a long story where there are few new characters. The one most surprised to notice this was the author himself, but this is actually the standard for any series.

While still including the style of switching the protagonists by volume like the ones already published, I want to give the spotlight to characters shaking the

same world in various ways from now on.

About the relationship of sister and brother.

This isn't only about sibling like seen in this volume, but I also believe that the blood relations of parents and children can't be cut off. They affect each other without even noticing, and it'll probably continue for their whole lives.

Because this is such a firm relationship, even if they end up separating temporarily for some reason, a time when family members can face each other from the front will surely come. Even if the other person is not in front of their eyes.

I believe that when that time comes, the actions they take will differ by the person. But I believe that on top of first acknowledging their own parents, they will decide whether or not to accept them. If possible I wish for both of them to accept each other.

About fighting with the enemy.

I believe that in this era, and especially in Japan, we'll not find any enemy being that's after our lives. If there was, we would seek help from a government agency such as the police.

Yet I believe that clashing with people or having someone like a rival is a daily occurrence.

Fighting at such times is varied.

There are times where you'd show your contempt directly, or circumvent and find another way, and at times giving up is also an important decision.

But I myself like people who keep fighting while only looking at their goal. Not blaming anyone else, they earnestly increase their efforts so that they could attain their goal. Including my own experience, I believe that's only lip-service and quite difficult, but doing so should be able to achieve many things. Actually, I believe that happens a lot even in Japan today as being so honest and serious is a Japanese trait.

At times using tricks, at times doing it in a roundabout way, at times hesitating.

But I wish for those who are serious and faithful at heart to carry the next age.

Now for thanks.

My editors Onai-san and Yamaguchi-san. I have also been in your care in the currently ongoing series "Challenger of Killing Time". Even though I tried delivering a weekly publication in place of a manuscript there, at least on the surface I made you smile. I'm sorry. Pranks should also be done in moderation. That isn't any thanks.

To the one illustrating, Ruroo-san. I'm very sorry for you being cornered by this cruel situation of overlapping with the special feature in the magazine. ... This isn't thanks either. I sometimes hear an illusion from the voice in my heart telling me not to increase the amount of characters too much.

For those of you holding this book in your hands, I humbly thank you.

This series can also continue because of those of you who read it.

I will keep doing my best.

June 2005

Iwai Kyouhei